

**History**  
of the  
**U.S. Food and Drug Administration**

**Interviewee: Marie Fink**

**Interviewer: John P. Swann, Ph.D.**

**Date: September 26, 2007**

**Place: Metairie, LA**



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INDEX

Tape	Page	Subject
1-A	1	Arrival at FDA New Orleans District Office
	2	Life, culture, and prior hurricane experiences in New Orleans
	6	Hurricane Katrina preparations and evacuation
	9	Resuming recall work from St. Louis
	11	Assembling with other staff in Nashville; return to St. Louis
	16	Returning and surviving in post-Katrina New Orleans
1-B	19	Negotiating the home repair landscape, Nov. 2005 to July 2006
	21	Reconstructing recall cases
	23	Permanent return to New Orleans, Dec. 2005
	24	Operating from home work station amid storm aftermath
	28	Metairie branch set up; Tulane and husband's post-Katrina experience
	30	Negative encounters with FDA Ethics Branch
	32	Wisdom of assembling New Orleans staff in one locale; donated leave
	34	New Orleans home repair landscape, continued
2-A	36	Mental and physical recovery from the hurricane
	41	On FDA's organizational future in New Orleans
	42	Pre- and post-Katrina life for the FDA community in New Orleans
	44	Observations on operations in the split New Orleans District Office
	46	On lab work vs. subsequent work at FDA
	47	Therapeutics of painting after Katrina
	49	FDA's success in dealing with staff after the hurricane
	52	Some lessons learned in the redeployment schedule
	55	End of interview

Interview with Marie Fink, New Orleans District Office

September 26, 2007

TAPE 1, SIDE A

JS: We're here at the Metairie Resident Post in New Orleans District Office of FDA, interviewing Marie Fink. It is September 26, 2007, and we're here to talk about FDA and Hurricane Katrina.

So, let's start with your background, how is it you came to the agency, what was your background that brought you to the agency, including where you grew up, and how is it you ended up in the New Orleans District Office.

MF: Okay. I am a native of New Orleans. My family has been from, is from here. My father's family goes back a couple hundred years, my mother's family not quite as long.

I went to grammar school here and high school here. I graduated from the University of New Orleans. I have a degree in chemistry.

I was working in research and development with one of the professors who had a small company, and one of the gentlemen who was a friend of his was Dr. Paul Kwan, and Dr. Kwan was a research advisor. And that's how I heard about the FDA.

And one day I was looking to make a change, and I called the lab. I spoke with Burt Guerrero, who was the supervisor, and it turned out that they had a position for a

chemist, it was temporary, not to exceed one year, and I was hired very quickly, within about two weeks.

And from then on, I started in the lab, and I was part of the pesticide group. I became a permanent employee fairly quickly. A position opened up. I applied and competed and got the position. And then, when the lab closed in 1997, I applied for a position as an investigator and became an investigator, a Consumer Safety Officer. And then, from there, when a position opened up for the Recall and Complaint Coordinator, as the Recall and Complaint Coordinator was retiring, I did a several-month detail there and applied for the position and got it. So that's where I am.

JS: Okay, great.

You grew up in New Orleans. Tell me a little bit about that, what that was like, what New Orleans life and culture is like, and particularly what life and culture is like in terms of dealing with the frequent storms and hurricanes that came into the city.

MF: Well, New Orleans is a very old city, and I did go away to college for two years to the Midwest, and it was culture shock. It was very, very, very different. And it's a very European city. The attitudes are very relaxed.

New Orleans is not Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras is one day. And the carnival season is about anywhere from two to five weeks, I think, prior to Mardi Gras day. That is not New Orleans. That is not indicative of New Orleans or New Orleans' attitudes.

It's a very old city. We have very provincial ideas. A lot of people don't even realize that. It's a fairly conservative city.

It's built like a checkerboard. Metairie is an exception. Metairie is a suburb of New Orleans, but New Orleans is built like a checkerboard.

You do not have strictly black neighborhoods; you do not have strictly white neighborhoods. You have white neighborhoods next to black neighborhoods next to white neighborhoods. It works very well for us. We're very comfortable with that. We don't have a problem with it.

As far as living here, our climate is hot, hotter, and hottest. It's hot in June, it's hotter in July, and in August everyone just leaves. It's terrible. Summer seems to be about 10 months a year. The most beautiful months we have are probably November and December because the weather is cool and a bit dry.

It's a beautiful area in which to live. It's a pretty area. If you don't like to eat, this is not a place to live, it really isn't. And it's an artist, it's a big artist and music community.

Our focus, unfortunately, is not real business oriented. It's more fun oriented. We enjoy a good time.

But, by the same token, it's a very close-knit city. We just are; we're just a close city. I go other places and they just seem large and at loose ends. Anybody who has ever been here understands that this is a very different area in which to live, and it is a very unique experience to say that I live, I am from New Orleans, I live in New Orleans, because anywhere I go, people want to talk to me about it, and it has nothing to do with hurricanes. It has to do with what is, what makes the city special, and it's very different.

Our weather here is, it's, nowadays, since Katrina, people are much more sensitive to what's going on. But I was here for Betsy. I was a child during Betsy. I

remember Camille vividly, in fact. I remember they cleared the roads. My father drove us down there to take a look at it. And we used to go to the Gulf Coast and see what was going on, and I saw boats pitched on shores like toys. I had never seen anything like it, beautiful homes that the only thing left were the steps, scattered bits of debris and still pieces of clothing and things. It was really something. Katrina was really frightening.

JS: Well, had you seen, in the city itself, much flooding from storms yourself, where you lived?

MF: Well, no. My parents -- we lived out by the lake in a place called Oak Park as a child. And as we got a little older, when I was 11, January 9, 1972, we moved to North Labarre Road, which is about five minutes from here, in Metairie, and this whole area was pumped out. This was a swamp. My father used to fish out here. But he decided he wanted to live there. We were all educated uptown, in like the university section. That's where my mother was from; my mother was from Carrollton. That's where I live now. And that is the historic high ground, so flooding is unusual from Carrollton out and in, into the city, into downtown. You have your higher area, especially as you get towards the levee itself. Now, as you go from the levee of the river to the levee of the lake, you'll notice you have a grade and you're going down, sort of like a little soup bowl.

The only flooding I remember during Betsy was the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward. Around Chris Steak House, Broad Street and all that, they had problems. But Oak Park, where we were, didn't, and we were actually uptown watching the storm on somebody's second

floor, a friend of my grandmother, my father's mother. Didn't see a lot of flooding, a lot of wind damage.

This city was less populated then. We also had less land. New Orleans East was not developed. Most of Metairie was not developed. Where my parents' house is, family home, that wasn't there. All that was still undeveloped marshland, part of Lake Pontchartrain. And so, as such, the city was able to rebuild much more quickly. This is not the case now.

JS: In the case of that storm, I mean, people didn't evacuate, did they?

MF: No, good heavens no. You didn't evacuate. You just went to somebody who was higher. It was not uncommon to hear of people who did what is called vertical evacuation. There was a storm coming, Category I, II, maybe even a Category III hurricane, some people would just literally go to a hotel downtown, like the Monteleone or something with a lot of brick, not wall-to-wall glass, and just get a hotel room -- vertical evacuation.

JS: Vertical evacuation.

MF: I consider that to be unusual.

I didn't start evacuating for storms until after my father died. My father died and my younger brother died in 2004, about six months apart. And then, after that is when I started, when storms would come, my mother was emotionally very fragile. I said, "Let's

just go. We can evacuate. I'll take a laptop. Let's just go out of town for a couple of days." And when Katrina hit, I was actually out of town. I was in Washington, D.C., at an American Chemical Society conference in D.C. I walked through the hotel lobby, past the bar, and I saw the track of the hurricane. It had just cut across Florida. And I said, "We have to go home. We have to get on the next flight; we have to go home. We have to board up our house, take our cats, get my mother, and get out."

JS: So this was the, around the 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> or so, 27<sup>th</sup> maybe. The storm had just passed, gone over the Panhandle of Florida, and, obviously, you come home immediately.

MF: Yes.

JS: This is maybe Friday?

MF: Friday, we were in D.C. Saturday we flew home. We boarded up Sunday morning. At four o'clock in the morning, I got my mother and my animals and got out.

JS: Where did you go?

MF: Well, because I was not prepared for this -- of course, I had no, there were no hotel rooms available; I didn't have any information I keep with me for hurricane safety, any of the AAA guides or anything like that. There was no way to prepare. So what I



did was I got home, I talked to my mother, and after my father died, his niece died. She was about five years younger than he is. His niece had two houses, one in Covington and one in St. Louis. And her husband was here. He said, "Come to Covington and stay with us."

I said, "Howard, I have two cats."

And he said, "Bring them."

So we all went to Covington, and he had spent the morning -- we got there I guess around seven. He had spent the morning, late in the evening and the morning watching the news. He said, "It's not safe. We're going to get a direct hit." He had too many pine trees. He was in Tchfuncte Estates, which is a -- it's a development in Covington. It's a golf course, sort of, gated community. And he said, "We can't stay here, it's not safe."

So here are the directions. We're going to stop over in Memphis. Here are the directions to the house in St. Louis. Here's a house key. We'll see you there.

So we drove all day to the early evening and finally found a hotel in Memphis. It was a Clarion by the airport. I'll never forget it. Two rooms. And we were there with almost everyone else from Chalmette. They were taking people with pets, which was not part of their general rules. But they were so kind to everybody. We were packed in this hotel like sardines. It was amazing.

And so, very chaotic, and, of course, you have people there who are, they have -- I spent some time with one family. It was a man and his wife, and they took two of the most infirm animals, a blind kitten and a 12-year-old Maltese. They had 10 animals that they had to leave behind in Chalmette.

And we spent three days in the hotel watching the storm and basically praying that we didn't have more death than we were going to have. And we watched it and we watched it and we watched it. And then finally Howard said, "Are you all coming at all?"

So we packed it in after three days and drove up to St. Louis and were there Thursday. No, I'm sorry. We got there Wednesday.

Thursday, I reported to the FDA office in St. Louis on where I was and what was going on. But I was in constant contact with the office. My husband brought a laptop with him. So we were able to watch all the locally broadcast news, weather, etc., to find out what was going on, because they had no way of really figuring out what was going on. Everyone was in Nashville.

JS: When you were in Washington, at the time you heard about this storm, that must have been just a pretty jarring thought, that you're up there. Everything that you grew up with was back there, and it must have been difficult.

MF: Well, I knew I had to go home, and I knew we were going to get it. I knew it. I could feel it in my bones. I knew we were going to get a direct hit. I knew it. I knew it was going to be a direct hit, and I knew it was going to be bad. I had no -- I just knew it. I can't tell you how, I just did.

And as strange as this is going to sound, I had a dream the night before, the only night that we were actually in D.C. I had a very, very strange dream. I mean, the damage that happened to my home was in the dream. People in the dream were actually in St.

Louis. I had no idea we were going to end up in St. Louis. They were in the dream. It was very strange, but I knew exactly what was going to happen. I felt like I was prepared. I told you it was going to sound strange.

That's why when I had people telling me, I think the most frightening thing was, is when I got to Nashville, and everything was rumor and conjecture, and all of the stuff. Other than Chalmette, we really didn't know who had what kind of damage. I mean, parts of Slidell were under water. I knew that Chalmette was gone. I knew that there was heavy, heavy flooding in Lakeview. So, I drove through there yesterday. Heavy, heavy flooding in Lakeview, so I knew Lakeview was gone. But my area of town, I had no idea. And I had somebody walk up to me and say, "Oh, I know where you live. You got four feet of water in your house."

I said, "What?"

JS: When did they tell you this? In St. Louis?

MF: No, when I got to Nashville.

I was in St. Louis. I should backtrack. We got to St. Louis. We were in St. Louis. I had reported to the office on Thursday.

JS: This was the Thursday after Labor Day?

MF: No, prior to Labor Day.

JS: Oh, before the day that they had required all the employees in Nashville?

MF: Yes. So I showed up at the office because I had open and active recalls. I knew I needed to tell people where I was.

So anyway, I get there and they don't know who I am, what I . . . They closed, they locked the door and they said, "We'll be back." They called their DD. Their DD calls my DD, and my DD apparently did not tell them I was coming, although I told him I will be reporting to the St. Louis office.

So, they let me in. They set me up with an office. I started e-mailing everybody I could think of.

JS: Just so I make sure, you reported to St. Louis?

MF: Yes. They have a Resident Post there.

JS: Okay.

MF: I was well aware that they had a Resident Post there.

JS: It's a post to the Kansas City District Office, right?

MF: Yes. And so I got there and then I immediately started contacting all of the firms

with whom I had open recalls that I could recall. And since I could access my e-mail, I had everybody's e-mail address, so I was just typing, letting everybody know that we were back in business in St. Louis, I'll be working here for a time.

And then I went in for about an hour or so on Friday, and that was the one-year anniversary of my younger brother's death, so I went home to be with my family after checking my e-mail and making sure it was okay.

And then I got a call saying, "You will be reporting to Nashville." And I had left my automobile. I'd packed up my husband's car and taken my mother's automobile, and I had left mine. So I had no car. So I said, "Well, that's going to be difficult." I said, "Well, why can't I stay here?" and they said, "Because you can't."

I said, "Okay. I need a little time because I have to figure out how I'm going to get there."

They said, "Well, where's your car?"

And I said, "Probably under water somewhere."

They said, "Oh."

I said, "I have to figure out how I'm going to work this."

And Howard had an extra automobile, so he said, "Mark, you take Stephanie's car." That was my cousin. And, Kit, you take Mark's car and you go, you're deployed to Nashville, so you go."

I was the only person that had work clothes because I was at a conference, and the only thing I did when I came home was collect like socks and t-shirts and shorts, because everybody always evacuates for three days. So I had work clothes. I was ready. They looked at me and said, "Where did you get all the clothing?"

And I said, “Well, all I did was add things.” I said, “I was already at a conference.” I said, “All I did was add extra stuff to my suitcase and brought it.”

And they said, “I see.”

So I was deployed to Nashville, and we all met there.

JS: What was it like . . . It must have been very difficult to concentrate on actually doing work.

MF: You don’t have a choice.

You know, I did the best that I could in handling the other stuff. Like everyone said, “Okay, we’re all going to the Red Cross.” Okay, I’ll go to the Red Cross too. And I came back and I still had, you know, the rest of the world goes on. You have to realize that at some point you say the rest of the world goes on.

I had to keep it together. I mean, my mother was falling apart. My cousin’s husband, who’d just lost his wife, he had not been back to St. Louis since her memorial service, so he was kind of a basket case. Her best friend was with us, and she was just recovering, still had the port, from colon cancer, still had the chemotherapy port in her chest. So I had my husband and my two cats. So I’m trying to look after all these people. So I have them, and then I have my job, and the thing is, is that, well, we have them there.

But when I went to Nashville, I was separated from all that. I had to have faith that my husband could keep these four people, himself and the three other people, together while I was in Nashville trying to keep my job.

So when you had to, when everyone was applying to FEMA and things of that nature, I sent my application in. And then I was only in Nashville for the month of September. I requested to be redeployed to St. Louis.

Actually, it was a little bit more complicated than that. I had been back to St. Louis twice.

JS: Between the time you reported and when you went back?

MF: Yes. I'm trying to remember what day it was, though. Excuse me. I'm trying to remember when it was.

But when it happened was, you know, I was in Nashville and we were all living in a hotel, and it was a little strange, but I had to go home twice, at least to check on my mother, because she's not, she's very, very frail and very emotionally just devastated by everything, and poor Howard was and Bette was, and my husband was just kind of lost.

So the last time I went back, Howard said, "This is crazy. There is an office here, and I know there is." So he called his congressman and opened an inquiry as to why I couldn't work out of the St. Louis office.

Oh, no, no, no, they were not joking, he was not joking. Howard said, "You need to be here. You need to be here to look after your mother and your husband." And I looked after Howard too, but he needed all the emotional support he could get. So he got his congressman involved; his congressman called.

And I went to my DD and I said, I explained the situation. "I've been called by this congressman's office. Apparently my cousin's husband has called and would like

me to be working out of the St. Louis office. They do have an office there. I have been there; I know where it is.”

JS: Did the District Director hear what happened after Howard called the, his . . .

MF: The congressman’s office called me first before they . . .

JS: Called you directly.

MF: Yes.

JS: Do you remember who the congressman was at the time? Was it . . . It wasn’t Dick Gephardt. No, he’d long been gone.

MF: No. I’m trying to remember who it was because I think I still have the e-mail, because it was such a bizarre thing to have.

JS: Well, anyway, so you got a call directly from the office of the congressman. What did they say to you?

MF: They said they wanted to know when it was, what was going on and when they could talk to the DD. I said, “Well, do you mind if I talk to him first?” I said, “This is sort of a surprising thing, and he has a lot going on.”



And so I talked to him about it, and he said, “Do you think I could have some time?”

And I said, “I wanted to let you know that this is happening before they just blindsided you.” I said, “Take all the time you need.” I said, “And you can also say no. This is your decision. Am I for this? Yes. Do I want this? Yes,” I said. “But in the end, it is your decision.”

And he said, “Well, I need some time to think about it.

I said, “That’s fine.”

So I called the congressman back and I said, “He’s considering it. I’ll let you know.”

So, I forget how long it was later, maybe a day or two, he said, “Would you be asking for per diem?”

And I said, “No. I have a salary.”

And he said, “I think we can work something out.”

And so I called the congressman back, his office back, and I said, “The situation has been resolved. You can drop it.” That was it.

And so I left Nashville and reported to the St. Louis office. And since my job is very portable, it was very easy to do.

JS: Do you recall roughly when this would have been that you went back to St. Louis?

MF: October. In fact, the first week of October.

JS: And you still had not had a chance to go back to see your home yet.

MF: No.

JS: Okay.

So you're working out of the St. Louis Resident Post.

MF: Yes. And then my mother demanded to go home. The moment they opened the doors to Jefferson Parish, I had to go. So I had to drive her home. And I have an older brother who lives in Mandeville, which is on the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain.

And so I said, "Well, I don't think Jefferson Parish is open yet."

"I don't care. I want to go home."

There is no reasoning with my mother. There never has been; there will never be.

So I said, "Okay. I'll take you home."

So I took her home, and then I flew back to St. Louis that night. I mean, literally, I drove her to my older brother's house, they drove me to the airport, I found a flight.

Well, actually, Delta didn't tell me that they cancelled the flight. No one told me. And so I got on the next, I think it was Northwest, flew me through Minneapolis. I got to St. Louis at midnight that night. So I flew back to St. Louis, and so my older brother had my mother for a few days.

But before they let her go back -- she flooded -- they'd gutted her house three feet down, the whole downstairs -- the house is 4,500 square feet -- went through the whole

house, just gutted everything. And so she went and, I mean, pulled up the carpet and floor, so she didn't care. She was home, and that's all there was to it.

But she had electricity, she had gas, she had cable TV. She was fine. As long as she was home, that's all that counted to her. Oh, yes.

JS: Everything around . . .

MF: Completely destroyed, completely destroyed. She'd get in her car and drive around and look at the piles of things.

I tell you, I don't know how she ate.

They had, the people in the neighborhood were back. There were a couple of other families. And one family at the end of the block was really looking after her. No matter what was going on, they were going to, they fed her. Wonderful people, wonderful neighbors.

I remember when they moved into our neighborhood about six months after we did.

JS: Maybe this is part of the tight-knit community of New Orleans that you talked about before.

MF: Oh, yes; oh, yes. And they're wonderful people, they really looked after my mom. God bless them, because she's a big old mess.

But anyway, most of my friends, of course, we were all scattered, and there were some of our friends that actually stayed behind in the city that were in the uptown area, which, of course, remained dry.

And, actually, a handful of them, there were a couple of people there parked out front of their businesses in lawn chairs with shotguns -- that was really interesting to hear those stories. That was a hardware on Oak Street -- to keep them from looting.

Somebody was trying to loot Cooter Brown's, which at one time was *the* only restaurant open. That's where, if you needed to meet somebody, you went down to the end of Carrollton Avenue and you sat at Cooter Brown's at a picnic table and waited for your lunch and a beer while you were waiting for your contractor, your insurance people, because that was the only place open serving beer and food. They must have gotten a special dispensation. It's that, and Drago's, who was feeding all the emergency personnel out at the St. Dominic School.

But there were no places to eat.

So one of our friends sat out -- he was an ex-Marine -- sat out on one of the picnic benches with a shotgun and fended off looters until they could get the place reopened, which was a few days later.

JS: What was it like seeing your home?

MF: Which one? My mother's home, my home, my childhood home, my grandmother's home? I made the tour around the city. I made a tour around the city . . .

[tape recorder turned off and on]

When I got home, it was November, and by that time I had several people who had actually walked by the house or reported the damage. So I knew there was a big hole in my roof. I knew that my house had not flooded. I knew I had pretty significant damage, and I had just been dreading . . .

I finished the last renovation project on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005, and I was on such good terms with the general contractor, all I had to do was send a fax. I had a crew there in no time. So that was -- I didn't have a problem. We were all competing for the same resources: carpenters, plumbers, electricians. But I had a general contractor whose entire crew was in New Orleans, Louisiana, and they had no damage. So I had gotten them on the phone, got them on the fax.

We met the insurance adjuster in November and went through the house. That was real challenging, because I have a slate roof, and slate is extremely expensive, and I have replacement coverage on my house. So that was a very serious negotiation process. I got what I wanted. I got my roof. I went and got bids and all sorts of things, and it was chaotic. I had to go use personal connections to find just somebody to come out and give me an estimate on the roof.

And then other people wanted you to sign a guarantee that you were going to actually use them in order to get an estimate.

JS: Then I guess it's not an estimate, is it.

MF: No. I mean, it got to be really hairy . . .

TAPE 1, SIDE B

MF: I told the insurance company, the roofer that we used, a sweet little old man, 67 years old, really was not up to scaling the roof and re-roofing the whole thing. He gave us an estimate just as a favor. I got one from some boys out of St. Louis, which was \$62,000. I looked at their bid and I ran the numbers, and I said, "They didn't even measure it properly. There's no way this is correct," because the insurance company gave me the measurements of the roof in squares -- that's square feet -- how many squares the roof was. The little old man did; and so did -- oh, it's not quality, it's a sheet metal and roofing company out here in Kenner. And I got that man's personal cell phone from his roofing supply person. It's a big Italian family. I know them personally. I called up. I was totally panicked. And she said, "Let me call Vincent," and Vincent supplies him the slate. So Vincent gave me his home cell phone number, and I called them and they got out there and they gave me a bid. Well, they ended up putting the roof on, and the insurance company didn't want to pay for it. So finally I'm, just like everybody else, I'm going into my savings. Thank God I had money to get everything moving, because floors were destroyed, staircases fell apart, ceilings came down. I put one foot in front of the other.

And in December, my husband had a conference in Oahu, and we were supposed to go, and we went. I'll never forget how miserable I was in the middle of December, because by this time I had left St. Louis. We had gone home for a day, gotten, packed a suitcase and gone to Honolulu to attend this conference. I think it was the International Organosilicon Symposium. My husband is an organometallic chemist. And so we went

to this conference, and while we were gone, they actually gutted the house, the areas that were damaged, without . . . The upstairs got gutted, part of the downstairs, and part of the kitchen, which was all brand new. It's very stressful.

So a job that would have probably taken five weeks took 10 months.

I happened to actually bump into the man that had refinished the floors during the first renovation, while walking down the street. I didn't even recognize him, I was so stressed out.

But as far as having my job, it was really easy to work because . . .

JS: You're still -- let's back up just a little bit. You're still working out of the St. Louis office?

MF: I'm still working out of the St. Louis office until the middle of December. The middle of December, I came home.

JS: Let's talk a little bit about the recall issues. It's got to be chaotic with the industry in your territory here.

MF: Sure.

JS: They're coming back online irregularly, I'm sure. Well, the big ones, I guess, the big firms are coming back online pretty soon, I suppose.

MF: The only firms with whom I had open recalls that were in this area at the time were one fish company, which was a chloramphenicol issue. And we don't understand why they used generators to keep the product cold because they were going to have to destroy it anyway.

JS: This was chloramphenicol used for aquariums?

MF: No. They were actually, it was in the fish fin. It was Vietnamese basa. It was in the basa for human consumption. It was a big old mess.

Anyway, so we couldn't understand why they would use generators to keep a product viable until they could destroy it. But the rest of the . . .

Well, and then the blood center. You know, that was the other one, and they got - - they were on Galvez Street -- that building got destroyed.

However, everyone else with whom I had open recalls -- Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee -- they weren't in the area. So the only problem I had were my files. Two file cabinets were sitting in my cubicle in New Orleans East, and I couldn't get to them, all the paper files. But we reconstructed everything through e-mail correspondence.

JS: So you were able to organize your recalls without actually accessing the files, the paper files, which, of course, wasn't going to happen.

MF: Not for months and months and months.



JS: Before the staff got back into the office building.

MF: Oh, yes. That was -- I think that was January before we got in. I was so elated to see them, and they weren't destroyed or anything.

And, see, when I came back to Louisiana in December, before we went to Hawaii, I got, I spoke with my supervisor. She allowed me to move home in December, pick my files up from St. Louis, put them in my car, and take them home, and allowed me to work out of my home until this office was ready, which was really nice.

JS: Were there many other employees that were able to do that?

MF: No.

JS: Obviously, part of the issue here is that, as you said, what you were doing is a pretty portable operation and is something that would lend itself to working out of your home.

MF: Well, one of the parts that was most important was, part of the city didn't even have telephone service. When I got there in November, I had telephone, I had Internet, I had electricity, I had gas, I had potable water. The only thing I was missing was cable, and that came on the last day. I was on grid; I was one of the first areas on grid because I was so high. Now, I didn't have streetlights, but everything else I had.

So it was very easy for me to do work from my home. It wasn't hard at all. I had ample space, the parts of my house, because my house is large enough that I didn't ever have -- I could close a door and for the most part never have to see any of the damage because of the way the house is situated. The upstairs got it. One room downstairs got it. I lost three portfolios of artwork, an easel, and a few other personal things. I wasn't real happy, but that's okay. Nobody died. And then part of the kitchen got it. But living and dining room, two bathrooms downstairs, the office -- none of that was -- the laundry room -- nothing was damaged.

JS: Amazing.

MF: It was; it was completely amazing.

JS: Had you been in touch very much with your coworkers back in Nashville from the time you moved back to St. Louis or even back here working out of New Orleans?

MF: Not really, because I always felt as though my position was very independent of a lot of things that go on here. Yes, recalls do generally surface after an inspection, but a lot of times I have firms that catch problems through consumer complaints -- we're nowhere near there -- and they just report all of the information to me, and we sit down and go to the centers and process things.

I felt really strangely isolated, especially when I was working at home, because there was no one else there. I mean, it's not as though I, well, it wasn't as though I didn't

pick up the phone and speak with my supervisor or the DIB secretary or anybody else who wanted to talk to me or had a question, compliance, investigations, whatnot. But there wasn't a lot of compliance work going on in this area that would have really drawn me in because everything's destroyed.

It was, that was, I think, the saddest part was just being here during that. I was spending an awful lot of time basically in it. You can't escape it. And it's still like that. We no longer have the three- and four-story-high piles of debris and like that, but we still have an awful lot of vacant lots, abandoned houses, gutted homes, partial homes, partially collapsed things laying around.

My mother's home, even for being flooded, fared pretty well. My home fared pretty well. My childhood home got eight feet of water. My grandmother's home got eight feet of water. My childhood home is still there. My grandmother's was leveled, was razed.

The amount of stuff that died, vegetation, was amazing to me. The brackish water came in and just lapped all over. The museum used to be alive with [unclear], used to be lined with beautiful trees. Gone. City park was ruined. Audubon Park isn't. The golf course is up and going. But you realize the staging area was the zoo. Everybody was staged at the zoo. The Corps of Engineers was there, right down the street, right down that road [unclear].

JS: On your own street, when you moved back, were there many people there?

MF: Oh, we were the last people there. They said, "It took you long enough to get

back.” I knew people that were saying that, when they were running from Rita, they just came home. They said, “It’s time to come home,” said, “I can’t be evacuated and then running away from other hurricanes. I have to go home now.” And that was . . .

And one of our neighbors actually stayed, and a dead body washed up on the street. Back to that checkerboard.

JS: What?

MF: That checkerboard I was talking about, a couple blocks down.

But apparently someone was shot during a drug deal and washed up down the street.

We got this much water on the bottom step. It literally just sort of covered our front lawn and then receded, and because we had our electricity back so quickly, I have an automatic sprinkler system, the grass was two feet high from watering. The neighbors were saying, “We were trying to figure out what was going on.”

But it was, we were the last ones on the block to get back. And on the other side of Carrollton, it starts sloping again as you go towards Jefferson Parish, so the water starts to rise, and there was real devastation.

Just trying to find everybody was difficult, to find out where our friends were. I knew where my family was, so that was easy. I knew they were either on the North Shore, St. Louis, or Metairie.

JS: But you had friends scattered maybe across the country.

MF: Yes, exactly. One of them ended up in Seattle, some ended up in Las Vegas. I mean, people just went, gone.

And it was, I think CNN was hell, just to hear that, even in the background. I turned it off. They were interviewing a young woman. There was water everywhere. She was on an overpass with a bag with whatever she could carry. And she said, "What was I supposed to do? Where was I supposed to go? I don't know anyone out of town. I live paycheck to paycheck. I don't have a car. Tell me, what was I supposed to do? Of course I had to stay." And I turned the television off after that. I said I can't watch this anymore, I just can't. These poor people. We were so unprepared.

JS: Did most of your friends come back?

MF: All but one, all but one. I had one couple got married in Dallas. There were some divorces from the stress of it all.

But most of our friends -- we have a very wide base of people, university -- my friends here, of course. But a lot of our friends have businesses in the area, so they returned, many of them, artists, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, lawyers, doctors -- they all came back, came back to rebuild, literally, literally.

One of my friends ended up in Florida for 10 months with her sister. She had, her house was raised three feet and had four feet of water. Basically, her ex-husband called her and said, "I've still got keys. I'm in there and gutting it now." She came back only twice. And she and her son lived in her sister's home outside of Orlando for 10 months

before she got back. But she came back. And she could have gone anywhere. She said, “Oh, no, home; this is home.”

And I was, I just felt like such a fish out of water everywhere I was. It just felt so different. And it isn't just home. If you live here long enough, you'll know what I'm talking about. It's different here. It just is.

JS: The establishment of the Resident Post here in Metairie, tell me a little bit about how that came about from your perspective, because you obviously ended up here.

MF: I do not have the particulars. All I know is that they were opening a Resident Post, and I was just grateful they were doing it because my husband is a tenured professor at Tulane, and that would have meant that if I had to move to Nashville, that would have meant I had to quit my job, if I would not have been able to work the position from this area, because my husband was not about to leave a tenured position at Tulane. He's lucky he still has it; Tulane closed.

JS: Well, tell us a little bit about Tulane. Obviously, this is an interview primarily about FDA, but obviously this is about New Orleans too.

MF: Tulane University closed its engineering school, with the exception of biomedical engineering, which is the feeder school for the med school, and chemical engineering. Those were the only two that they had. They have an architecture school, they have mechanical, they have electrical, they had all these engineering programs, and they

closed them all, including computer science, so many people lost their jobs. My husband is a chemistry professor, so he kept his. But while we had, we were gone, I think Tulane continued to pay them. But my husband had the foresight and the connections that he was able to -- he wrote grants to get his graduate students, who'd scattered to the wind, payment, to be paid while they were in absentia. Most of them, he actually got laboratory positions across the country with other universities for the time being to continue to research.

His core group -- there were three graduate students and a postdoc -- were given offices and laboratory equipment and chemicals, computers, telephones, everything, at Wash U, Washington University at St. Louis. And while my husband was there, he lectured, gave seminars, did research, got a whole lot done. I'm so proud of him. He got, just jumped in there and got to work and got everybody, got his students all prepared, and they loved having him. And it was considered a win-win situation for everybody, including the university. It was thrilled about, really loves him. It was just a wonderful experience.

And there were people who stayed behind in the science department at Tulane to fill the dewars, to keep the magnets on the NMRs from clenching, because they had to fill the dewars with liquid helium. And then helium became scarce. And at one point they had to bring in an armed convoy from another state, armed convoy to bring liquid helium in to fill the dewars to keep the magnets from clenching, because it was so chaotic, those days or weeks after the storm.

The power had completely gone out, all of the power to the science building, which is Percival Stern, looks like a, on Freret Street, it looks like a computer punch card.

All of the electrical was in the basement. It's funny. The only basements I've ever heard of in the city of New Orleans, but they have one, and that's where all the electrical was. But people stayed behind in that building to guard the equipment, to see to it that the equipment, even when it was running on generators, was still operable, because you're talking about, you know, some of these huge NMRs and stuff, that's a half-a-million-dollar piece of equipment. If that breaks, you know, you're in trouble. Your research might not, your research can come to an end. Research is expensive. You run off grants. So there were people there that were dedicated enough, stayed behind and looked after everything. I was amazed.

And when they had to bring in an armed convoy, I was shocked. They said they didn't have a choice. They had to bring in an armed convoy [unclear].

You know, desperate times, desperate measures. People don't always act like people; they act like animals.

JS: Well, when did Tulane open again?

MF: January, January.

I had a little bit of trouble with -- the only problem I found with the FDA was with the Ethics Branch.

JS: The Ethics Branch in headquarters?

MF: Yes.



JS: Tell us about that.

MF: My husband has a CREF account, TIAA CREF, and it's a blind fund. And I tried to explain to John Gomez that it's a blind fund. He has no idea what's in there. "Yes, he does, and you will provide me with the documents."

I said, "Mr. Gomez, I'm in St. Louis. Tulane University is closed."

He threatened to put a black on my, put a note in my file. I thought, fella.

So when I went back in November to meet with the general contractor and get things started, I dug through the files. I faxed him what I had. I said, "This is all I have." I mean, he wanted to call me uncooperative, and I thought, well, you know, blah-blah-blah-blah. I said, "This university is not going to open until January. Even if they have the information that you supposedly think I have, it's not going to be available until January."

JS: Why was the ethics group interested in . . .

MF: Because he thought I could pick the stock.

JS: I see.

MF: My husband -- it's a blind fund. No one can pick it. That's all taken care of somewhere. Tulane University isn't even in charge of it. They have some company that

does that. And I tried to explain to him, and he said, “There are people who are able to do this, and you need to provide proof!” Never again.

You know, I flat-out told him, I said, “I am in St. Louis.” I said, “I have not even been home. I do not know even if I have a home to which I can return. The city has been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, and Tulane University is currently closed.”

JS: Did you mention this to anyone?

MF: I was upset. I thought to myself, if you gave me five minutes alone in the room with that man, I would have smacked him upside the head, I was so furious.

No. I think that I had just about enough of him. I was furious. I’ll never forget it. And I thought to myself, this is how you treat your employees? Because everything else, FDA had gone above and beyond the call.

JS: Such as . . .

MF: The smartest thing that they could have done, they brought us all together and put us in one room in Nashville. That was brilliant, because this is a very tight-knit district. We are a very close group. We have, most of us have been working together for many years. I’ve been here for 17 years, and I’m considered one of the older people. Until we got this push of really young people that have come in, I was one of the new people. I was the new lab person for a long time. Nicole E. Hardin was my supervisor. Oh, no.

JS: Nicole came here in the mid-'60s.

MF: I was in kindergarten when she started here.

But it's a very tight-knit group. We were always a very cohesive and tight district. There wasn't a lot of animosity, we were always very close. And so the smartest thing they could have done was kind of bring us all together.

JS: Of course, a lot of people weren't too crazy about the idea of being brought together quite at that time, when it happened.

MF: Well, you know, when it first happened, I wasn't real crazy about the idea, until I got there and I realized this is where I needed to be. We have to be here; we need to be here for each other. This is where we need to be.

It was actually, at first, I was very reluctant to come. But they said, "You're coming," so "Okay, I'll be there." But it wasn't till I got there that I saw the wisdom of the decision to do that. That's really smart.

JS: So each of you offered support.

MF: Yes, to one another. Something. I mean, we were there, we were together, we could see each other was alive.

JS: Well, and you were actually housed in the same Residence Inn, right?

MF: Yes.

JS: So you probably saw a lot of each other.

MF: Yes. We were all able to spend time together and be together and support one another. Oh, it was great. It was the best thing they could have done.

I was just floored by the generosity and kindness of everyone around the country, donating leave so that we could go home. I mean, I was really fortunate. I took two whole days of the leave I could have taken. You know, everyone had donated leave for the Katrina victims so that we could go home and tend to things. I had two whole days, and I could have even done it by check, by mail. It was to meet with the general contractor. I already knew him, knew the whole crew. That wasn't a problem. And to meet with the insurance adjuster. And I actually had to physically meet him. I was lucky. I had people here.

I mean, I looked at the general contractor and said, "Don't you still have a key?"

He said, "Yes. I don't even know where it is. Do you have another spare?" because these are people who had spent a year in my home before this, so they were used to it. They knew where everything was.

I was fortunate. I had a general contractor, somebody, a crew I could trust to come in the house and gut it and not leave the doors open. You couldn't ask for anything more.

JS: That sounds pretty unusual.

MF: Shocking.

JS: Because I think a lot of people who needed work like this done just had a devil of a time getting it done, getting people to come and do it, and getting trustworthy people to come and do it.

MF: Well, that's why 10 months for a five-week job just didn't faze me at all. I told my mother. My mother had gone to her friend's, they're neighbors down the block, and they had a contractor through their church, where she got on his list. And they were in and out in a month because this was a man who worked at three houses at a time. He'd start one, be in the middle of one, and finishing one. And then, as he finished one, he would pick up another one. So they were in my mother's house for a month, start to finish, and were done. And that . . .

And he had lists of people, 50 people long, just waiting in line for him. And it was like that everywhere.

And I'm just, like I said, I'm just fortunate. First of all, nobody died in my family.

JS: Yes. With all the stress and so on after the storm, it took its toll on a lot of people, including some I've talked to.

MF: Oh, sure. We are still in a real mental health crisis in this city, and we will be for a couple more years. I don't anticipate the mental health crisis actually going anywhere for five to seven years. We have no infrastructure for that. There are no therapists, there are no psychiatrists. There aren't a whole lot of medical professionals. The suicide rate after the storm was outrageous. I mean, one of my friends who's a physician, one of her close friends committed suicide who was a physician. But she got herself a bunch of topical analgesics and just started cutting. She sliced herself to death. It was horrible. She made sure she was in the bathtub so she bled out and [unclear] too much mess [unclear]. But the suicide rate was incredible.

We were still finding bodies. We're still finding bodies out there, people who were in the storm who were on the margins of society, those people who either had no relatives or homeless or something. They're still finding new bodies when they're tearing down these houses. They're not finding a lot of them, but they're still finding them. And they will until they've torn down every home.

The biggest loss that I see is that our elderly are all gone. We used to have a huge elderly population. They're gone. Either they died, their children took them and won't let them return, or they just cannot return.

We have finally opened a housing project, thank God. Poor people need to have a place to live too, thank you. And the city is still broken. I'm so grateful we have a

Resident Post here because I was afraid they weren't going to open anything because the city is broken. You don't want to bring in, have people here and something that doesn't work.

JS: When you say the city's broken, what do you mean?

MF: Well . . .

JS: Are you talking about the services, essential services that a city provides?

MF: Yes. You have -- do not get sick here. You do not have an adequate number of beds in hospitals. We don't have an adequate number of hospitals. We don't have enough doctors or nurses. We have enough dentists, though. [unclear]. They've reopened a dental school.

JS: Dental school, where?

MF: Oh, out on Bayou St. John. LSU Dental School has reopened, thank heavens.

We're still having problems: potholes. Roads are in terrible disrepair, even worse than before. We don't have a lot of city services. We had more city services before. People are desperate for employees. Mental health is a big issue now. We just, people can't return. You have to have people that are going to empty the trash, that are going to run the . . .

Cities are not run by wealthy people. They're not run by the smart people. They're run by the people who collect your garbage. They're the people who are the ones that run the pumps in the Water Department. Cities are not run by the government. They're run by the people who make [unclear], and our city has just realized that. I don't know why nobody noticed it before, but it's been, it's problematic. And the spirit of the city is broken, still, too. People are disgusted. People are leaving in droves.

JS: What was the population of New Orleans, I guess New Orleans proper, before the storm, and do you have any idea what it might be today?

MF: It was a little over 400,000, New Orleans proper, no suburbs. Now, they're saying, "Oh, you've got to look back there." I'm trying to figure out what "back there" means, because we have a lot of migrant workers, people are coming in, rebuilding the city. I suspect it's a little over 200,000.

All the housing projects are empty. Lakeview is empty. Drive through Lakeview? Nobody's there. New Orleans East. That's empty too. Entire areas of the city are like abandoned. They want to tell me that almost everybody's back? No. You can't tell me that. Tulane University is up and running . . .

#### TAPE 2, SIDE A

MF: There are some things that are up and running, but not a lot.



JS: The tourist industry. How does that seem to be faring?

MF: Not well. Well, all you have to do is turn on the television and see the murder rate. That's always broadcast across the city or across the country.

A lot of people have the misconception that New Orleans itself is totally destroyed, and New Orleans itself is not. Everything that you come to New Orleans to do is up and running, everything. Take riverboats, go out to eat at a nice restaurant, visit the French Quarter, visit the Garden District -- all those areas were high. Of course, they're all up and running. That's okay. But we don't have a lot of people coming to those.

And, my goodness, the murder rate is outrageous, outrageous.

One of my high school friend's son was attacked in the French Quarter. They almost beat him to death. For what, \$20? I mean, vicious, vicious crime, not just this drug-gang-oriented stuff. They're picking on prime targets, and people are afraid, and they should be. Crime is a problem.

JS: Another way that the city's broken..

MF: And what really breaks my heart is we have people here from Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, all coming to rebuild the city, and what are they doing? They're kicking in the doors, and these poor people who are being paid in cash, and after they give them the money, they kill them. That just breaks my heart.

There are some people in this world who do not belong walking the face of this earth. Those are those people. And they're coming here, they're trying to do a job, and just do it, send their money home, and leave. And they're killing them for it, and that is just beyond wrong.

So, yeah, the city's broken, and it's frightening.

I have my heels dug in. I'm not going anywhere. But it's, every day it's something. And I can tell you from experience, when you run into a problem, it just seems monumental no matter what, because we're all still competing for the same resources. You've got to know somebody, got to stand in line. Everything is hurry up and wait.

And we just recently got our tax assessments. Mine tripled. [laughs] Okay. And I knew some people whose went up 10 times, 10 -- not three, 10. Now, my house was, sure, was undervalued, and I looked at it and I said, "This seems reasonable." But 10? They were assessing vacant lots at \$80,000. A vacant lot? Not even downtown. Where do they get \$80,000 for a vacant lot? But things of that nature.

We have things going on. Nothing seems to flow in a logical pattern, because what Katrina did was pull you out of it so that instead of having things fall like a row of dominoes, it's disjointed. Projects that were started in March of 2004 or May of 2005 that are now coming to fruition, they can't really do things because some piece is missing. Either we don't have enough labor force to bring it in. The tax base has been disrupted. Something's happened. We don't have streetcars on Carrollton Avenue. I've never known us not to have a streetcar on Carrollton Avenue. They took my streetcar

and moved it downtown because the lines that they were running, of course, they got damaged trying to make other repairs. But it's challenging living here.

JS: Perhaps in that light, did you have any ideas if the District Office was going to be . . .

MF: Reopening here?

JS: Reopening in New Orleans?

MF: No, they're not going to. The DD made it out of here. And I don't blame him, because he's not from here, he never experienced a storm. But he was in Slidell, and then he was there, and he's perfectly happy in Nashville. I don't blame him for that. But by the same token, I do understand that this will not be the New Orleans District for much longer. It's getting to be Nashville District, and that's fine too, as long as I can keep a job here. If they ask me, they tell me, they deploy me to Nashville, I'm gone.

JS: You'll have to quit.

MF: Yes. I have not been told that that is a necessity. Nobody has alluded to that. Nobody has even put that in my mind. But I do, I am a realist and I do know that if I could not work remotely from this Resident Post, I wouldn't be able to keep this job, because my husband would have a more difficult time finding work being a tenured

chemistry professor at age 50. I could always turn around and be a lab chemist, go back to school, get a teaching certification. I can always do something. Start a business, a tutoring business, do anything. I could go back to school and get a certificate and become an electrician. I'd be working for the rest of my days fixing houses. But my skill set is different. I have more of a broad range of skills than he does.

JS: Right.

The New Orleans District Office, I'd heard, was -- there was a great deal of camaraderie, esprit de corps, whatever you call it. People have gotten together. In fact, I was shown some pictures of events, showers, of parking lot crawfish boils.

MF: Oh, yes, that was us.

JS: Lots of things like that. This is obviously an operation here in Metairie and Mandeville, a fraction of the size. Do you still have that kind of sense of camaraderie that you did in the old days?

MF: No. And I think there's, I think it's because there's enough depression going around for all of it.

The last thing that we were talking about was the spirit of the office, and I said no, that the spirit was different, and that it has a lot to do with depression. And it does. It isn't that we aren't still close, and it isn't that we aren't all still good friends, but it has

deeply and profoundly affected all of us. And it has made us sad. We are not, we don't have the same essence of joy and fun that we had prior to this.

JS: Does the group get together at all?

MF: Yes, we do. But it's definitely different. It's more businesslike. A lot of the joy of being together is not there. And it is because of what we have endured or what we continue to endure.

JS: Could it also be the fact that part of it, I mean, a large part of the group that you spent time with before is a long way away now?

MF: That is also part of it, we are fragmented. Some of us are in Texas and Atlanta. One of our buds is in South Carolina. So we're all sort of spread out. And then we're dying. Howard Lewis just died. And he was part of Nashville, he was part of New Orleans for a while. I knew him, knew him well. He had an aneurism and died. Many of us are retiring or . . . The frightening thing, I think, for me is that my touchstones in the agency are all very close to retirement, if they're not there now. And my deepest connections are with these people. And I know that they could walk out of this building at any time and say, "It's been nice knowing you," and that's going to be really hard because that's just going to be like, sort of like a flower dying and the petals start to fall. That's kind of how it is.

But it's a great agency. I love working here. I love my boss. I was just on the phone with her. We have a great working group. We have a wonderful district.

I hear other people talk about their districts. I wouldn't trade mine for anybody.

JS: And what is it? The way everyone works together, the nature of this district?

MF: Our district hangs together as far as they're very supportive of one another. When there's competition, it's not nasty. It's competition, it's not back-stabbing. Everybody competes for the same things; everybody wants the same kudos. Everything seems to be fair, and people are treated, for the most part, fairly. And that's all you can ask, really, is to be treated fairly, come in and do your job; when you do something right, be praised; when you do something wrong, you know, not get called on it, but corrected, and that's the way they do things here in this district. They don't shut you out if you have a problem. Or if there is a problem, you're supported rather than shut out.

JS: I know what you do, what we talked about before, is pretty self-contained. But do you have a sense for, logistically, how things are working with the District Office now in Nashville and the posts here in New Orleans, some distance away? You've got Investigations Branch split up, Compliance is down here, and so on? Do you have a sense for how this is working, from your standpoint, how things are working out?

MF: It's kind of like a clown in a circus with loose joints. You ever see a clown in the circus? They're sort of walking along and they're really loose and limber, and their joints

are all flowing, and they're not walking stiffly and in concert. They're walking and they're moving all over the place, and everything's stuck together, but it doesn't seem like it. We are not perfectly in concert, and we won't be because this is, our district is split in such a way. It's going to take some time to get used to it. This is now a Resident Post, and that's okay.

The memory of what it was is, I think, the biggest thing hindering me, because I remember being the District Office and having all the district together, and wasn't that great. But now I'm a Resident Post, and it's got its challenges, but everyone is completely accessible. I can walk in here and speak with Pat about compliance issues; I can call my boss on the phone, speak with her on investigations issues; I can talk to anybody in this district, no matter where they are, and they are always available to talk about what's going on and what needs to be, how it can help them, how they can help me.

So we are together. It's just sort of a looser association. It's not quite as tight as it used to be. But there is not animosity, which is nice. There isn't a lot of anger, there isn't a lot of . . . There isn't a lot of anger that this is a Resident Post and not the District Office.

JS: Is there a sense that those in Nashville perhaps feel that, gee, we wish we could be down there too, but we can't? Is there a sense, not envy, but a sense of . . .

MF: Longing?

JS: Yes.

MF: A few. And then a few who have lost everything made such a clean break that they have literally started over: Barbara George, Denise Collins. There are some people who I know have to be torn, an investigator whose children are just flourishing there, but I know she wants to be here. And Janice is finally back. I mean, there are people who are desperate to be home and have nowhere to go. We have, I know one of the CSTs is stuck in Nashville. She has nothing left here other than her heart and soul. That's hard, because there is no position here if she were to say, "I've got to go back home. I cannot live here any longer. I must go back home and rent an apartment." There isn't any position here for her. The position is in Nashville. And that's pretty heartbreaking.

But there are times in life where your decisions are made for you. You either accept that decision or make a new one. And I would prefer not to have to leave this job because I really enjoy it -- not as much as the lab of course. Nothing can beat the lab. The lab was the best job you could possibly have. But this job is a good second.

JS: Your training was in chemistry, so it certainly made all the sense in the world for you to want a lab job.

MF: I loved the lab.

I'm not a people person at all, at all. I would come home from investigations and cry because I hated it so much. I can't be exposed to people for long periods of time like that without really, really freaking out and getting shingles. Oh, yeah, it's a real problem. I'm definitely a lab person. You can put me in a lab all by myself for days with just



instruments, every so often poke my head out, see if anybody's there. That would be fine; that's ideal for me, which is one of the reasons why this position is good, because I don't have to be directly involved with people daily -- not that much.

So I owe the FDA a lot. They found that I was not, I was just really unhappy in investigations, and they found a position where they thought I could really succeed and be happy, and they were right -- although it's not the lab.

JS: How long did you do investigations after the lab closed? The lab closed when, in this District Office?

MF: It closed the end of 1997. I think it was October or November, something like that. I came on board July 17, 1997, and I was in investigations until -- I was an investigator for about three years before this position opened, so I've been doing this for about seven. But I was a chemist for about seven and a half years, just here, not prior to when I was in research and development.

Have you been on our website? Have you seen our Katrina thing?

JS: Yes, yes, I have.

MF: I'm working on a series of Katrina paintings. That's just one.

JS: Have you painted?

MF: The destruction?

JS: Are you a painter?

MF: Ever since I was a child, actually. We were laughing about that room. They were saying, “Are you going to turn that into an art gallery.” I said, “I don’t know. I haven’t decided.”

But, no, I’ve been painting the destruction of Katrina, some of the broken houses, boats pitched in front yards.

JS: It must be hard for you to do that. Or do you find it therapeutic?

MF: I find it therapeutic, I really do. It’s just, it’s a way of cataloging what’s happened. And I didn’t come up with this idea. I’m not going to let you believe that I am any sort of real pioneer in this field.

I take after, there was an oil painter who came down here in October and started in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and just set up an easel and his oil paints and started painting the piles of rubbish, the beat-up broken houses, the overturned cars, really stirring stuff. His name is Phil Sandusky. He’s actually just published a book of them. I was amazed. I’d seen it in a magazine, and I was so enthralled with it, I thought, “This is what I’m going to do. This is how I want to catalog my experience.” And I’ve driven around, I’ve taken things

out of the newspaper, and then I've driven around town in areas I probably shouldn't be at, and taken photographs of people just sitting on steps of abandoned houses.

JS: I guess some people, when they see cars going around their neighborhoods, might not like that.

MF: Well, they're not too terribly thrilled. I mean, I'll drive through stuff, jump out, click, jump back in, and drive. I've seen people jump out of bars, saying, "Lady, what are you doing?" and I say, "I'm just taking a couple of pictures for a painting class," and they let me come. This one lady said, "Crazy little middle-aged white woman running around my neighborhood selling drugs." Of course not. I'm taking pictures. And I'm not making any money off of it. It's just for my own benefit.

JS: Looking back now two years after this happened, a little bit over two years now after Katrina, the agency did lots of things, lots of things that helped, maybe some things that could have been done better. What kind of stands out in your mind as you look back and see the way the FDA handled the situation for the employees individually and for the office?

MF: Extreme generosity. That's the only thing I can think of when I think of what we've been through, is the extreme generosity of the agency, total support, total support. Well, not so with the Ethics Branch. But other than that -- that was a blip on the radar -- everything else has been nothing but total support of the agency. The agency, the people

in the agency, they, I never once felt abandoned, not once. I never felt lost, I never felt like I would not be able to survive this. I never felt that the pressures, I never felt that my job was ever a burden, and that they were all very sensitive to that.

And, you know, I was able to do my job. I had no problems with that at all. The people in the industry were just saying, "Are you okay?" I said, "Yes, I'm fine." I said, "I can't do anything about that that's there. I can't even get there." We have other stuff that we use now.

And I had a problem with about two days' worth of complete memory loss from stress, and they were really nice about it. They said, "Well, we call that Katrina brain," and it's true. People were experiencing little brown-outs and holes in their memory for no apparent reason, but it was stress related.

JS: This was memory of the storm, of the evacuation, or just random events?

MF: Yes, random events, days. I mean, I had already, the two days before Katrina, that one day was gone. I had no idea what I was working on, who I talked to, nothing, and Katrina had not even hit. It was just a chunk of memory gone. It was very strange. And I found out I was not alone in that, that there were little holes in my memory here and there, and that's kind of freaky.

But other than that, I've got to tell you, the FDA was there and they were very supportive, and, honestly, had I not had this job, I don't know what I would have done.

I heard about what happened at the post office was not a good scene. I had people from other agencies who were pitching in over at . . .

JS: Before you go on, what happened at the post office?

MF: The post offices were decimated. I don't even know what happened to the postal employees. They're just gone. We didn't hear of anybody actually looking out after the postal employees. They were like a bunch of overworked, disgruntled people.

Social Security took a real hit. They didn't take care of their people. They didn't find a place for them. I've talked to somebody at Social Security. I think that's what it was, the IRS or Social Security.

I said, "Are there any jobs there?"

They said, "Well, I don't know if we have any jobs."

I said, "How'd you fare?"

And she said, "Oh, well, we're just sort of on our own."

I said, "Really?"

I'm surprised that other agencies were not looking out for their people like FDA looked out for theirs. I mean, this is literally the agency that looks out after their own. I've never seen anything like it. Amazing.

JS: The agency is going to encounter more emergencies, maybe not on this scale, but it will happen again.

MF: It could be anything. It could be a fire.

JS: It could be a fire, it could be an earthquake, could be a disastrous tornado -- whatever.

MF: We could be bombed.

JS: What do you think we might have learned from the experience here that the agency can apply later?

MF: Well, I can tell you that their compassion was amazing, just, I think they handled it well. I wouldn't want to, I don't know that they had done anything terrible or did anything . . . I was so surprised that it was managed so well.

They may have given people a little bit more time to deploy where they were going. But, like I say, I didn't even know if I had a car. I just said, "You go, you go." I was like, "That's your job. Here I go."

But I think there were a few people who probably would have preferred to have a bit more time.

JS: A bit more time . . .

MF: To deploy. To deploy to wherever it was we were headed.

Well, Kip, who's now in -- have you talked to him? He had quite the story. He was in Norway, Sweden. I think to get the next flight cost \$7,000 just to fly him home to

get his family out. His house took nine feet of water. He has a slab. I mean, people were coming from everywhere. But he eventually ended up, he was really upset about being deployed to Nashville so quickly because of everything that he was encountering at the time. I think it would have been a little easier to have deployed people as quickly as possible, but, by the same token, be a little bit more sensitive that some people were not going to be able to get there that fast.

JS: Some people indeed did not make it there on the day, that Wednesday after Labor Day, though, right?

MF: There were some people who did and then there were some people who didn't at all. I was quite surprised. I think that was sort of a, I think -- I know the circumstances, and I can understand why, but I think that management was not overly pleased with that. They had ill relatives.

I had my mom with me. I don't go anywhere without her. She's frail, she's older, acerbic. No one else will take her. She's all mine.

But as far as that goes, it was, I think they could have used a little bit more time in deploying everyone. You know what I'm saying? This is, working with people a little bit more individually on that would have been helpful. But I didn't see where they did anything wrong.

I mean, it was genius to put together a fund of ours for people to use in addition to their leave, to come down, clean their houses. Some people had to come in and gut their houses, no one to do it; to find a general contractor; to work with their insurance

companies. All of that was necessary. If you didn't have leave, you know. I had lots of leave. I didn't use a whole lot of it. I used two days of that time. But there were so many people that, you know, six weeks, they needed six weeks because they didn't know what they were coming home to. And it turned out that they had major damage in their house and they spent days with insurance people and contractors, and sometimes it took weeks.

JS: Well, I don't know how big the pool of donated leave was.

MF: It was actually substantial. It had to be substantial because I didn't even realize this, that, well, that's when somebody said, "Oh, no, that's donated leave."

And I said, "You're kidding me. People donated leave?" because we have the donated-leave program for people who are ill, which is, to me, just terrific. People with cancer are able to, which now is considered to be manageable illness, are able to seek treatment, still retain their medical benefits, a paycheck, and are able to come back and work. That's what this agency does.

JS: Well, you've offered some incredible perspectives on this disaster. I do appreciate it, and it will enrich the record all the more.

MF: Well, thank you.

JS: So thank you very much.



MF: It was good to see you again.

END OF INTERVIEW