T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Ida Belle Joshua

COLLECTION: 4700.1684

IDENTIFICATION: Ida Belle Joshua is a native of New Orleans, Louisiana and survivor of Hurricane Betsy. She worked as a hairstylist, teacher’s aide, social worker, and was active in her community as President of the Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Council and Area Beautification Committee.

INTERVIEWER: Nilima Mwendo

PROJECT: Hurricane Betsy

INTERVIEW DATES: November 20, 2003

FOCUS DATES: 1949 - 2003

ABSTRACT:

T3336, Side A.

Purchased a lot in the Ninth Ward and her husband built their first house; moved in 1949; her coworker at a beauty parlor suggested they buy the lot; lots were $200 each; bought the lot and paid for all building materials up front so they wouldn’t have debt; first years in Ninth Ward the area was open land, not many properties; homes on Tennessee Street were mostly owned by whites; Ninth Ward was mostly African American; community involvement of Pete Sanchez, Teddy Marchand, Sherman Copeland, and Ike Reynolds; Ida Belle worked with them under the Total Community Action Program; neighborhood before Betsy was “doing good”; after Betsy residents sought urban renewal; nominated Sherman Copeland to represent them; Ida Belle and her husband moved into Ninth Ward to avoid deteriorating area where Magnolia Projects were being built; she was a hairdresser, her husband worked on the riverfront; she has always helped people in her community; discusses elementary schools, high schools, and colleges attended by her three children; meeting with Moon Landrieu; no recognition from City Hall because they were an African American community; no playgrounds or bus routes in the area; before Betsy neighborhood was mostly poor but people were hard workers and kept their houses up; she was scheduled for surgery the day before Betsy, her youngest child was sick, her oldest child kept an eye on the news; heard a loud sound under the house, water was rising, husband tells her it’s time to go; water was coming from the direction of the levee; family piles into her husband’s boat, along with several neighbors; water was rushing so strongly it took all night to get to the next block by boat; people from other houses yelling for rescue; got to second story of friend’s house but water kept rising; husband left her and children at Port of Embarkation; walked to Canal Street and got a ride to her mother’s house; husband was gone for a week still rescuing people; stayed with her mother for three months in a one bedroom apartment; she “felt like dirt”
accepting clothes from a friend; left mother’s house and moved in with friends, the Gordons, stayed there for a year; Red Cross and SBA loans had three percent interest, Ida Belle was adamantly opposed to borrowing money; injustice of other parishes getting grants while Ninth Ward only got loans; she fought for a grant, attended many meetings, finally got enough to pay medical bills and finish their house; poor people got loans and squandered money on drinking and shopping.

T3336, Side B.
White community moving away from Tennessee Street, homes bought by African Americans but they could not afford to keep the houses up; community started to deteriorate; she stayed through all other hurricanes up until 2002 when she evacuated to Mississippi; belief that levee was blown up to save other parts of the city; nobody ever admitted to blowing the levee; increased community activism after Betsy into the ‘70s; breakfast program for poor children at Lawless Elementary; eventually left the school after filing a lawsuit for unfair treatment of teacher’s aides; discussion of federal grants, urban renewal; trying for many years to get grants for urban renewal; difficulty of being a community activist, contact meetings, travel, time consuming; urban renewal grant was spent on building homes and other investments in the community; community leaders got rich, she got nothing; after grant money ran out, community organizers left; she lived in another community but then moved back to the Ninth Ward; neighbors there were more caring; grants were given out differently in St. Bernard parish; her children don’t talk about Hurricane Betsy; younger people haven’t picked up the torch of community activism; she discusses her disappointment with elected officials and corruption; difficult to find people who have the time or are willing to make the effort to work to better the community; role of churches and community centers; drug problems in the community; “we don’t have to worry about ‘the man’ killing us anymore, we’re killing ourselves”; advice for young people to be successful.

TAPES: 1 (T3336) TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 34 minutes

# PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 57 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Correspondence, Interviewee questionnaire, article from Real Estate Journal (2 pgs), partial article from Loyola Law Review (4 pgs)

RESTRICTIONS: None