

Richard A. Barrera

Interviewed by George R. Lang

October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas

**George Lang:** Hello, this is George Lang, It is October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 4:45 (p.m.), in a room in Bay Hall. Joined with me is Richard Barrera. Do I have your permission to record?

**Richard Barrera:** Yes

**GL:** Alright. Can I get your full name?

**RB:** My name is Richard Anthony Barrera

**GL:** And where are you from?

**RB:** I was born and raised in Corpus Christi.

**GL:** What specific part of Corpus Christi?

**RB:** Um, the Crestmont area. So it's near the southside, but it's like southwest Corpus. Yeah right on the outskirts there.

**GL:** Ok, and um, how was it growing up in Corpus?

**RB:** Um, well like most Corpus people, I hated it (laughter). But um, I slowly grew to love the city. Uh, I left it shortly after high school because I just thought there's nothing here. But uh, about ten years later, I found myself back

**GL:** And did you go back to that same area you grew up in?

**RB:** No, now I live in Portland which is just across ah the Nueces Bay.

**GL:** And that's where you were when the storm hit, correct?

**RB:** That's where I lived. So, during the storm, we didn't evacuate during Harvey. We actually, um, because of circumstances, we, uh, me and my dad and his uh girlfriend didn't leave. But I was left to board up my mom's house. I live with my mother um so we tried to get her and my grandmother out as quickly as possible that Friday. And me and my dad took care of boarding up all the houses. There was my grandmother's house, which is still in Crestmont, that's the house I grew up in. Um, my mother's house, which is in Portland, and it's only a few blocks from the ocean. Luckily, the uh, I really wasn't worried too much about the storm surge because we have that huge bluff. But then also, my father's house. He lives in the Del Mar neighborhood, not where the college is but the actual proper neighborhood near Louisiana. But, he's um on a pretty high bluff there too. So, we boarded up his house and decided to stay there.

**GL:** In Del Mar?

**RB:** It seemed like the toughest. In the Del Mar neighborhood.

**GL:** So, could you elaborate on your preparations for the storm?

**RB:** Well we weren't prepared at all. Um, we were actually that day, I do employee benefits consulting so we do open enrollments which is basically like uh when people have to resign up for their insurance every year, we have to meet with them and talk to them one on one. So, one our new clients is the city of Mathis. So, they were renewing for October 1<sup>st</sup> so we were there a few weeks prior, or um about a month prior I guess ah to talk with everyone and enroll them. We got there around eight o'clock in the morning. We knew Harvey was coming this way, but we just didn't know how bad it was and one of my coworkers said, "oh wow, it's gonna be a category three." And my initial thought was oh well we gotta go and ah that's actually exactly

what I said. I said, “well we all need to evacuate” and everyone was just like “are you sure,” “do you really think we have to”. And I remember when I took an eight-grade science class where we dedicated about um about a month to just studying hurricanes. It was a great class. It was really fun. The professor, or um the teacher, was really fantastic but he drilled into us, over and over, the dangers of hurricanes and how unpredictable they are for one, but two, how dangerous they are. So when I heard it was a category three, 120 mph winds, I think, ah I figured we all needed to leave. I convinced my coworkers to leave, and I called my mom up and tried to convince her. My parents are no longer married, haven’t been for a long time, but they’re still pretty close. So I was trying to convince her, and I was there with my dad. I work for my dad. I was there with my dad, and my dad said, “Well she needs to go because I want her to take my mother,” my grandma. So I called her back and said Dad has asked if you could take grandma up to Austin to stay with Aunt, my sisters. And she said, “Well the girls are in school right now and I’ve got to work” and this and that, and my dad said, “Can you just hand me the phone?” So I handed him the phone and he said,” Kimberly, I need you to take my mom up to Austin, I need you too.” She just turned 85, so he really didn’t want her to be here for the storm and my mom kind of understood and said, “ok, I will.” And he said, “we’ll take care of your house, just worry about the girls, yourself, and my mom.” So, she left work shortly thereafter. The girls go to GP, Gregory Portland High School, and she pulled them out. They were shutting down school anyway, and uh she went and picked up my grandma and left about an hour later. In the meantime, we were at Mathis for the open enrollment which is supposed to go on from eight to five p.m. and no one’s really showing up. So, my dad says, “Well, let me go talk to the HR person” and he goes and finds the HR person, and they’re having an emergency meeting for the city at that point. So, he walks in, and she told him, “We’re dealing with this, I don’t think we

can do it right now.” And he said, “Ok, we’re gonna call it off. So we all came back, and I asked my mom, I know she had boards; I know she had plywood for the windows. So I asked her about it, and she said “Well, let me go look” and well um unfortunately she stored them outdoors and they had been stored outdoors for the past decade. So when we went to go pick them up, they just crumbled in our hands. It wasn’t gonna do anything. So I went to the HEB on Port and uh kind of wondered around and saw that there was this huge line. It was this enormous, I mean it’s Home Depot, it’s a big warehouse.

**GL:** Um, you said HEB?

**RB:** I said HEB? I’m sorry. Home Depot

**GL:** Oh okay

**RB:** My apologies

**GL:** On Port?

**RB:** The one on Port and Ayers. So, yeah I guess the north-east corner of the building is where they have all the plywood. They had a line that snaked through the entire store and it kind of circled around on the southwest side, like on the complete opposite side of the store. The way I found the line was, I just saw a bunch of people waiting and was just like, “What is this? Oh, its plywood.” “Are you looking for a generator? Because that’s that line over there.” So, there were hundreds of people in the line. It took me about three hours, maybe three hours, maybe three and a half hours of waiting to finally get to the front and bought all the plywood um. In the meantime, my dad boarded up my grandmother’s house because they already had stuff setup. And then we headed out to Portland at about six, seven o’clock at night and we

**GL:** On that Thursday?

**RB:** Yeah on that Thursday. Ok, it was Thursday. Friday was when it actually hit so it was Thursday we did the open enrollments in Mathis and when I went and shopped and got the plywood and then we went to Portland and I'm not exactly a carpenter. I've never used a circular saw before, so um, and my dad was like, "That's your thing, this is your mom's house so go measure all the stuff and get everything but you're taking care of that". So I kind of got the hang of it after a while. Me and him got into a groove and started um really taking care of it. We probably got all the boards put up by about 1:30 that night and then we went back to his house, and in the morning, we got up uh we got up pretty early and finished his house. Um I don't actually remember, when did the storm actually hit?

**GL:** It was that Friday night. We can fact check it.

**RB:** Was it that Friday night?

**GL:** We'll fact check it

**RB:** I think it was that Friday night. So, what did we do Friday during the day? I think we pretty much just took care of ah

**GL:** Did y'all get food and water for the weekend?

**RB:** No, we were in Mathis on Friday. We must have been in Mathis on Friday. So, yeah this all happened on Friday and it came through late that night, early Saturday morning, I think

**GL:** I think it was the am that night.

**RB:** So yeah, so we went back to his house on Louisiana at 1:30 in the morning and yeah we finished boarding up his house and his girlfriend, Cindy, had already started working on it and

we finished. Oh wait actually their landlords did most of it and we just finished up when we got back. Um but yeah, I was pretty nervous. It hit as a category four?

**GL:** I think so. It hit as a category four.

**RB:** Yeah so really, I got pretty scared. But um, the reason we didn't leave was because of Cindy's family. Her father is 86 and was very stubborn and felt like he had to stick around to watch the house. I don't know what he was gonna do, I mean if your house blows over there's not anything you can do. But he was pretty adamant about staying behind. So she was as adamant about staying behind. So Dad was adamant about staying behind, and I was like, "oh well, screw it, I'll just stay. I'm not gonna leave with mom and I'm not gonna leave in the middle of the night on Friday night." So

**GL:** So were you worried when it was just a cat, a category three storm?

**RB:** Most definitely, I mean um but I didn't have that like dread. Like I thought it'll be fine um but but that night when we started to hear that it had been upgraded to a category four. That's when I really started getting scared. I didn't sleep that night at all, it was just, there was no way. So I read by candlelight all night and listened to the wind howl. Luckily, we didn't get the brunt of it, so it wasn't too bad for us.

**GL:** You mentioned you had a childhood teacher that taught you about hurricanes. Did you ever experience hurricanes growing up?

**RB:** Um, no. Well there hadn't been a major hurricane. I was born in '85 so eighth-grade was in '98 for me and there was no real major hurricane that I can remember between, or in my childhood up to eighth grade. And then I think Ed came through my, I think it was my freshmen year of high school, or um college. Maybe the year before or in the summer and all of my

friends had had that teacher, so we all had the fear of God put in us by him uh about hurricanes. So whenever we heard that one was coming, we just left. So like when Ed came, we heard there's a hurricane coming. "Oh well so and so lives in Austin, this is a great excuse to go to Austin." So we left at like 2 o'clock that morning. But I was always adamant that we need to board up, we need to leave. But Corpus has been really lucky. We haven't had a uh, up until this one we haven't had a major storm hit us and arguably it still hasn't. Um, I was worried coming into the storm because of that. I thought too many people would stay behind because they would get complacent and not worry that the storm would as devastating as it can or was. But again, we really lucked out. I feel pretty lucky. My mom had pretty extensive damage to her home, to her roof, mainly to all of her fences. Um I think the saddest part, the saddest loss though was she had pecan tree that was like 45 feet tall, 45 feet wide. It was completely uprooted. But uh luckily, it completely missed her beautiful deck and missed the house as well and fell in this perfect spot where this giant tree just kind of laid itself down next to the deck and next to the house, taking out all the fencing and all the power lines and cable. That was actually probably the worst part of the hurricane, the actual experience of the hurricane, was dealing with the lack of electricity and then uh because the electricity wasn't restored at my mom's house for five days I think. But we didn't get internet back till last week. Which was actually, that was a real pain in the ass for school. There was a video that I had to watch for one of my courses on YouTube, and I had to write a paper on it, so I came to the library here and watched it, which is not normally what I would do but. It's a little pain in the butt. And of course, there's all the entertainment that comes with the internet. That was lacking. But again that in a way did help with school since, we're history majors so we do a lot of reading and writing, so it really helped me focus on doing my readings. A lot of times at the beginning of the semester, it's easy to kind

of get behind um but this semester was not that way for me. I didn't have much to do besides listen to my records and read.

**GL:** Could you expand more on what you did that Saturday when you woke up?

**RB:** Um

**GL:** Like in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

**RB:** I, we were just relieved. I think the first thing we did, we ate. We had some snacks around there that we ate and then we just wanted to see, we wanted to check out the city especially cause he's only a few blocks from the ocean, right there off Santa Fe. So, me and him, we got in his truck and I uh, work downtown so our office is on Shoreline right next to the Whataburger on the bay. So, the first thing we did, we were like, "let's go check it out." So, we drove down Ocean onto Shoreline. You could see all the trees down everywhere, all the fences knocked over, all the signs messed up. But there was no real major damage downtown. Some of the older buildings, like their facades came down a little bit because um, we drove around Chaparral, the old streets there. But our building is this four story, brutalous concrete building. I was saying like, "hell we should just stay in the office. This is like the safest place we could be. We're on the fourth floor in the middle of a concrete building. Um, so we went to go check on the office to make sure um. Something that I forgot to mention was that Thursday night, we went and secured the office. Um we do, one of my dad's offices, the main office, has a view of the marina so we took as much as we could out of there, his office, and moved it into mine and turned everything else, like his book shelves and stuff against the wall. So we went back there to kind of make sure that the windows weren't busted out and that all the computers were still there, there's no looting or anything. But um, we couldn't get into the building because the door was off the hinges, the



front door to the office building was just like off uh but someone had come, and the alarm was going off, but someone had come in the night or the early morning I guess and chained up the door so you couldn't get in at all. Um but surprisingly that area still had power, so we really wanted to get in because we didn't have air conditioning or internet or anything, so we tried, we were thinking like, hopefully we can work. This is our busy season and we had just been interrupted on our big project, the open enrollment, to take care but we obviously couldn't get into the building. We couldn't until Monday and for about a week after the elevators were broken in our building, which was just hilarious. Four flights of stairs, it's really a lot worse than it seems. Especially since there's a lot of older people and a lot of out of shape people that work in that office. So you'd see people in the morning trudging up the stairs and just kind of taking breaks on the second floor, the third floor. It's a six story building, so I would imagine going all the way to the top and then having to go to a meeting that's outside or going to lunch, or anything, you're having to walk up six flights of stairs, three or four times a day. I'm sure that was pretty terrible.

**GL:** You mentioned that your father's house was close to the ocean. Did you have to deal with any flooding?

**RB:** No, um, its um, his house, I'm trying to think of which park is near there. It's near Oleander Park, if you're familiar where that is.

**GL:** I'm not familiar.

**RB:** Ok, its um, it's a park on Ocean Dr. that has quite the bluff in front of it. So, it's I mean a good 30 feet, 30 foot bluff or so. So the storm surge would have to be pretty insane and uh

there's usually not any flooding, no matter how extensive it rains in his neighborhood. So we were, we were pretty, we felt pretty safe about the flooding.

**GL:** Ok

**RB:** I was more worried about the wind at that house. My grandmother's, we were kind of worried about flooding there because her neighborhood is old and the drainage is poor. But she's pretty far inland so the storm surge wouldn't have gotten to her either. And then again at my mom's house, I think it's the bluff. I've read before and I think this is true but the bluff in Portland is the tallest bluff on the Texas coast. It's like 40 something feet so um, I really wasn't worried about flooding there.

**GL:** Ok, so that Saturday, and the following days, how did, how did y'all get to food, access to clean water?

**RB:** Well one of my friends is uh, she's a homebrewer and she lives in Callalen near Anabelle, and she made this Facebook post like, "hey we've got power, we have a crap ton of beer, I'll cook for everyone. If any of my friends are without power, their homes are damaged or anything, come on over." So I was like, "Peace, Dad" and Dad and Cindy ended staying at their house for the next few days, but I went and spent it with my friend in Anabelle which was pretty great. It was kind of like we had a post hurricane party. I showed up, another friend of hers and a couple and her and her husband and we just kind of partied for the next few days. It was pretty great.

**GL:** Um, what was your reaction to the Mayor's request to mark your arms with your social security number. I know that gained a lot of traction in the news.

**RB:** Um, well, I thought that's rational. Again, my eight-grade science teacher had put the fear of god in me and yeah um, you're not gonna have your ID. If I had been in Port Aransas, I think it was the Port Aransas mayor that said that, or was it another? I don't think it was the Corpus Christi mayor that said that.

**GL:** It was a local mayor, I don't know the specifics.

**RB:** Yeah some local official that said that but um I figured that, I knew we wouldn't need it with where we were. We would have been identified but if I had been weathering the storm, riding the storm out in Port Aransas, or anywhere like that, I would have been worried about being drowned and washed away and maybe someone finding me naked with just my Social on my arm. Do I think he should have said that? Probably not, you should be more calming for your citizens during a time of crisis like that. I think it's logical, but it's not something that he should have said.

**GL:** That's fair. Speaking of the local government, what was the response like in your area?

**RB:** Um, I didn't see much response from the local government, and I'm referring now to Portland. Because Portland was much worse than Corpus was. The power was out for most of the city. Some houses were pretty extensively damaged. But um a few days later after everyone had started really cleaning up. I mean it's still not cleaned up completely, and we're a month later. About a week later, when everyone had taken all their limbs and put them on the sidewalk or whatever for brush pickup, you could go down my street and it's a pretty broad avenue and it's just filled every single on both sides of the road just brush, all the way down my street. I imagine the reason it's taken them so long to remove it all is because they just don't have the capacity to do so. It was last week when they finally picked up stuff on the side of my house.

They picked up the stuff in front pretty quickly but the main place we put that tree was on the side of the house because it was in the back yard. Um, but I guess in the end they started doing the trash pickup daily as well. So that was pretty nice of them because we filled up our trash can multiple times in the next few days. But what I did see a lot of um was citizens rallying together, volunteers from out of town. There's still trailers up in Portland like uh sanctuary services, some other religious organizations that have a disaster relief bus or something of that sort. There's still a bunch of those all around Portland and you could see all the volunteers wearing the same shirts, same colored shirts. I remember driving home after work, almost every day going past this certain area where I guess it was a rallying point. And you'd see a group of about 20 people, all dressed in shorts and the same blue shirts, all just exhausted, just sitting there on a trailer, all looking down, not really talking to each other much I'm guessing because they worked all day, helping with relief. The real heroes were the men, or the men and women I would guess, in the bucket trucks, the electrical workers, the linemen that came out and repaired all the electricity. They were working almost constantly. I'm kind of a night owl and I'd go to sleep very late and still you would see them driving around in convoys at midnight, 1 o'clock in the morning, um, trying to bring power back to uh the surrounding area, to this area. Um, I don't know, I mean, once, I thanked the guys, I talked to the guys when they were repairing mine and after mine was restored, I don't know, I felt a little verklempt. I teared up just a little bit when I'd see a convoy of the electrical workers driving by. Thank you, thank you, guys so much.

**GL:** Okay, well for my final question, I want to ask you, um, do you think Hurricane Harvey exposed the weaknesses of the city or showed the strength of the city?

**RB:** As far as the government, uh, I think their initial response, uh I really didn't care for their initial response. I think there should have been a mandatory evacuation with a category four

coming towards Corpus. Of course, we didn't know it was going to be a category four till later but even with a category three, I think there should have been a mandatory evacuation. If there had been a mandatory evacuation, Cindy, my dad's girlfriend, her dad would have left because he's 86. I think he would have realized there's a mandatory evacuation, this is serious. Then she would have left and therefore my dad wouldn't have stayed and I wouldn't have stayed. I wonder how many people were in that situation. So, if the hurricane had hit 30 miles further to the south, Corpus would have been devastated. People would have died. But I think if the mayor had issued or country judge O'Neill had a mandatory evacuation it would have been much safer. Um, but again I really think Harvey brought Texas together. Not just from my personal experience but from everything I've seen, well with my friends who live in Houston or my friends who live in Rockport. I know the Student Citizen Activists here at the university, an activist group, a student organization, they almost immediately started organizing to go out to Rockport, to help anyone they could and seeing that, seeing Texans really come together, to help each other afterwards, it was pretty amazing. There was one other thing that I'm almost reluctant to talk about, um but it goes back to the person I stayed with. I've known this person for 18 years or so. And um, she was one my first like interests, love interests, when I was like 14 (laughs). Um, she was actually the first person I took on a date, a date if you'd call it that. We went to a political rally (laughs). I've been a nerd for a long time (laughs). We went to like a city council political rally, and then I found out one of my other friends was interested in her and we were both kind of nerdy, so I felt like, "Oh well, I barely have a chance with her," and I just kind of let him do his thing and put distance between me and the girl. And then she went to A&M in College Station and became an Aggie, which is very much not my culture um so we grew apart for years, but come to find out, her marriage is failing when I found myself staying at

her house during Harvey, we found ourselves talking more and more. Now, she's separated from her husband since then and we've kind of fallen in love, um which is interesting. Actually, I think this is the first time I've admitted this out loud.

**GL:** And on record. (laughs)

**RB:** (laughs) Oh well. It was one of the major effects on me of Harvey. Probably, hopefully the lasting effect will be this rekindling so not bad.

**GL:** Well that's all my questions. Do you have anything else you would want to add?

**RB:** Um, I don't know. It's a bittersweet time, um, both for my personal reasons, and I really think, I mean besides like the terrible economic impact and the impact on people's lives, it brought perspective to a lot of Texans. It reminded us how dangerous hurricanes can be, so maybe we'll be more prepared next time. I don't know, I'm hopeful.

**GL:** Alright Richard, well thank you for talking with me

**RB:** No problem.

**GL:** And that is all.

End of Recording.