

Raychel Smyer

Interviewed by McKenna Coffey
October 4, 2017
Corpus Christi, Texas

McKenna Coffey: Okay, so I think we've got the recorders going. Uh, this is McKenna Coffey interviewing Raychel—

Raychel Smyer: Smyer.

MC: Smyer. Oh, it is October 4th, 2017 and we are in the O'Conner Building on the Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi campus. Do I have your permission to record you, Raychel?

RS: Yes.

MC: Okay, thank you. So, we're going to be talking about Hurricane Harvey. Um, you live in Portland? Or—

RS: Aransas Pass.

MC: Aransas Pass. Um, was this your first experience with a hurricane?

RS: Yes.

MC: Yes? Um, what was that like for you, finding out that there was going to be—

RS: Well there's always been, like, threats you know, like Katrina and Rita so, I didn't believe it (laughs).

MC: You didn't believe it at first?

RS: No. So I was, I wasn't even worrying. I was like, it's just going to move.

MC: Hmm. So, what was your initial reaction when the information about the hurricane changed and it became more serious?

RS: I was still pretty mellow.

MC: (laughs) Still?

RS: Yeah, um I didn't really—I didn't want to leave. I still didn't think it was going to hit our house. I was pretty sure I was going to be fine if I stayed.

MC: So at what point did y'all—did y'all leave? Did you evacuate?

RS: Yes.

MC: What, at what point did you decide that?

RS: My boyfriend decided it (laughs). He refused to let me stay, and my mom, I told my mom to take the kids and just go up and I'll just stay with all the animals, but no, they wouldn't do that. Everybody was freaking out because I just wanted to stay and just ride it out. So, to stop all the arguing I decided to go.

MC: So where did y'all evacuate to?

RS: My boyfriend has a brother up in Austin, and he also just moved down from Austin so, it was like, the closest relatives, and it was convenient because his brother was just moving out of his apartment into his brand new house so, the lease wasn't up yet and he just let us have it, the empty apartment.

MC: So, sounds like it worked out?

RS: It worked out.

MC: So, uh, what day did y'all decide to leave?

RS: It was the very last day, like that Saturday, because it was supposed to come hit that Saturday night around 10pm, so we left Saturday morning.

MC: And what was it like evacuating?

RS: Because we left late, um there was nobody on the roads.

MC: No traffic?

RS: So, we just got there pretty quick. My mom and dad took separate vehicles and they took five hours though. Took forever (laughs).

MC: Did y'all prepare for evacuating at all? Did y'all stock up on supplies or board up?

RS: We boarded up, we board up every time there's like, a threat, but no, we didn't stock up. I was pretty sure—

MC: When did y'all board up?

RS: Um, we started maybe two to three days before the hurricane hit.

MC: And was it kind of crazy buying supplies? Were there a lot of people?

RS: Yes. I know all the water was gone from Walmart and the boards, um, we could only get like these small, they were, they weren't like big plywood boards that were for the window, they were like small 2 by 4s that were like pen—fence posts, you know, so we were, we had to hammer up each individual, one layered on top of each other so—

MC: So, you said you let your mom take your kids?

RS: No, I was going to have her take the kids, but since they wouldn't leave without me, I took my kids.

MC: So y'all all travelled together?

RS: Yeah, it was my boyfriend and I in one—sorry, my boyfriend took one of the kids with our three dogs in his vehicle. I took two kids with two cats in my vehicle (laughs).

MC: And how old are your kids?

RS: Ten, eight, and four.

MC: So how did they feel, I guess, once y'all evacuated? Did they think—

RS: The four year old really didn't care, he wasn't really, he just thought it was like another trip. I guess the eight year old Saya, she was fine still. It was my ten year old, uh, Hikari, she was freaking out the night before because I said I wanted to stay and she's like "you're going to die and I won't leave you so I'm going to die" and I was like "we're fine" and she's like "no we're going to stay here and drown" and I was like "okay we're going. I'll leave, we'll go." So she was flipping out.

MC: So, what was it like watching the hurricane being away from your home?

RS: Well, that was interesting because as soon as we got to his apartment, we turned on the news like right away and we just laid there on the air mattress all night watching it. It was really interesting to watch the weathermen just right there, out in the open, with all the wind, I was like "y'all are crazy". Yeah, but it was interesting to see all the wind and rain and the vehicles that were still in Corpus passing them. I was like "hey they didn't evacuate" (laughs).

MC: So—

RS: I remember the one in Galveston, that lady gave that reporter (laughs) on the beach a case of beer. That was hilarious.

MC: So did you see any places, uh on the news that you recognized, like "hey I—"

RS: Shoreline.

MC: Shoreline?

RS: Um-hm, yeah um, it was right outside the Omni. There was a reporter and I could tell where he was because of like any statues or just the trees and I could see the ocean and Shoreline, I could see Shoreline.

MC: Did seeing something like that make it more real, what was happening?

RS: Yeah, yeah because it was actually hitting Corpus in like an hour or two and you were right there and you could see all the wind and rain picking up and I was like "well, it's actually going to hit. It did not veer away."

MC: I'm trying to think of what I want to ask next. So I guess the evacuation was okay for y'all.

RS: Um-hm. Yes.

MC: Um, at what point did you decide it was fine to return home?

RS: Um, we didn't return home right away. Um, I had planned on going home that Sunday because we left on Saturday and I wanted to go home Sunday because it was supposed to end by, you know, sometime Sunday and I wanted to see how the house was. But I think we, I think Harvey came back or something? They kept saying it kept coming back or whatever, so we decided to stay a couple more days at the apartment. Um, oh and then we were going to go home, we were on our way home, and then my mom and dad called. They were staying in Jourdanton. FEMA got them uh, two hotel rooms, and they told us about the other hotel room and they said um, that they had been getting calls from our neighbor, that like all of our trees were down, the driveway is blocked. The satellite dish came off our house and there's a big ol' hole over the house. And I was like "the only satellites that are on the house are over *my* room". So then I started to get a little bit worried because everything I own is in that room or the storage unit in Rockport so, I was like, so that sucked. So we decided to stop at Jourdanton and I think we were there, oh my gosh, I think a couple weeks.

MC: That's a long time.

RS: Yeah it was awful. I have never hated staying in a hotel room before. It was awful.

MC: How big was the room?

RS: It was small.

MC: Small?

RS: It was very, very small, with three kids, me and my boyfriend, three dogs and two cats. It was very small, and not like (laughs)—

MC: Sounds kind of chaotic.

RS: It was awful. And we had to, every time the housekeeping came by we had to take everybody out, even the dogs and cats because one of them, one of the housekeepers was allergic to cats, so we had to take everybody out for like an hour and a half, and then put everything back in. I was like "this is just not going to work". But um, oh and then while we were up there, because of the gas shortage, all the gas stations, because we were driving back and forth to the house while we were staying there, it was like three hours away. And so we'd drive back, because we had to meet with FEMA investigators, like, and they didn't all just come at one time, because they had one for each of us. So we'd drive back and forth, it was a lot of gas. And then the gas shortage, um, it didn't hit Jourdanton until like, the last two days that we were about to leave. So we were out of gas and we couldn't get gas to return, so that was— As soon as one gas tank, car came into the, all these cars lined up at that gas, it was terrible. But we finally got gas and I found a hotel, Schlitterbahn, which I'm still staying at (laughs). The Schlitterbahn in um, on Padre Island is finally, was finally taking FEMA evacuees and FEMA granted us to move over there so we moved right, right away. So then we got back in Corpus, um two weeks ago, maybe.

MC: So what was it like coming back to your house and seeing the damages?

RS: It was interesting. It was—like, the fences were gone, the trampoline was gone. The rabbits' hutch oddly made it. The rabbits were in the house though so they were fine. Um, uh the driveway was covered with our palm trees and all kinds of debris and dead rabbits, dead moles, like dead chickens, I was like "wow". It smelled so bad. Um, our turkey made it though, so, he didn't die (laughs). Um, when I saw the damage at first, I thought for sure the house was going to be a wreck, but the house on the inside was fine. I think my dad's room because we have air condition, air conditioning units in the window, his air conditioning unit, like part of the siding was off so his room got a little bit wet and moldy. Um, but the other rooms were fine, the decks and the front porch is messed up. And I went to my room right away because you know how they said the hole, so—sorry, I had to check my room first, but everything was fine. I mean, the satellite dishes did get ripped off, but it just got ripped off from the shingles so it was just shingles off. Our roof is all, about half of our shingles are missing. So it's all tarped up now, but on the inside, it was good. It smelled kind of mildew-ey, moldy, but it should be okay.

MC: So I've never gone through a disaster like that myself. Um, it sounds like y'all weren't able to move back into your home. Um, why did they decide that y'all just couldn't live there?

RS: Um, it was some of our doors won't shut because whenever they got wet they expanded so we need new doors obviously. And um, the mildew and the mold, they were, they worried about us inhaling it, so they have to do these mold tests and readings and whatnot. We couldn't get up the driveway for the longest time until we got an electric chain—no, a gas chainsaw because all I had was an electric but we had no electricity for like eight weeks (laughs). So that was another reason we couldn't move back in, because we had no electricity, no water. So um, and I have kids so we can't stay in that. Um, their schools are still out so—

MC: (inaudible)

RS: We still haven't moved. Yeah my daughter, my oldest one, the school just opened up, they start tomorrow. So me, my boyfriend, and my daughter are moving back in the house today as soon as we get home because she has to go to school. So it may not be completely done, but we still have to move back in for her, um—

MC: Is the house safe to move back into at this point?

RS: I think so. I mean the mold, I think they haven't came back to us with the test but my room and her room which I just, I just made the girls' room all nice. Like I, we gave it, um, new coats of paint. I put siding and trim all around the doors and the bottom of the, like I fixed that room up really nice. It was really expensive. It was really nice. Pretty proud of myself (laughs). Um, but her room and her, um my other daughter's room, they're all fixed up and I don't smell any mold in there. The bathroom is not so great. It's um, but my room is okay, I think, so I'm hoping we won't get like any kind of mold poisoning (laughs).

MC: So how did your kids feel about coming back home and seeing like all of your trees and,

RS: Oh, they did not want to return. Like, the first time that they say it, my little, my four year old, my son, he um, all the time whenever we'd stay out too late he always says "I want to go home. I want to go home." And when we finally got home, he's like "I don't want to go home." So yeah, he did not like it, they did not like it. They didn't want to be there.

MC: Well I'm sure y'all are staying at Schlitterbahn they're probably like "of course I don't want to go home".

RS: Yeah (both laugh). They enjoyed that pool (McKenna laughs). Except for um, I guess one of the tiles was sticking out and it was super sharp and my eight year old daughter, she was swimming, she gashed open her foot and it was like, it was a bad gash too because they were saying that she was going to need stitches and stuff. It would not stop bleeding for two days.

MC: Wow.

RS: Yeah they said that they, that they would take her to the hospital and stuff, but um, my friend's a nurse and she came over and looked at it and she said that an eight year old doesn't really need stitches right now as long as we use these like, there's like these certain kinds of Band-Aids, that if you, um, if you pull one side to the other it'll keep it shut and it'll grow. So that's what we decide, because I didn't really want her to have to go through the whole, numbing and stitches thing. But yeah, we moved rooms a couple of times. But overall it's a nice hotel.

MC: So have y'all had any problems trying to deal with the aftermath?

RS: It's just really money problems. We're kind of running out because of always having to eat out instead of cooking, and gas money. What other problems, um, the insurance hasn't really gotten back to us about fixing anything that was broke or any of the fences, or— I think the last time that we did hear from them, um, they said that they want us, they want us to fix everything and then send them the receipts of how much it is and then they'll reimburse us. But then my dad was like "we don't even have the money to do that. We thought you guys would like, hire a contractor to send out or something." So there's a little bit of a problem right there, not sure like when things are going to get fixed.

MC: Yeah, that sounds like it's not really going to solve the problem if you need the help. I mean if you can afford to do it yourself—

RS: We'll see how that turns out (laughs).

MC: So, have you always lived um, in Aransas Pass or in like the coastal area.

RS: Um, no we moved down here from Kansas in 2000.

MC: Oh okay.

RS: Yeah.

MC: So you've been here for a little while.

RS: Yeah.

MC: So you've had some experience with coastal living. So now that you've experienced your first hurricane, where you actually had to evacuate and had damages, has that changed your perception on living on the coast?

RS: Not on just *the* coast, I've never really liked Corpus, (laughs), but so as soon as I graduate I've always wanted to move away. But no, yeah I'd still live on the coast like somewhere else.

MC: Do you think that you would take future hurricane threats more seriously? Or probably no?

RS: No, (laughs)—

MC: No? Still no?

RS: I've pretty much avoided every natural disaster that's come. Because when we used to live in Kansas, they've had tornado threats like, so many times a month. And I was just like "yeah we're good". They never hit us (laughs), and then the other hurricanes, they never hit us so I was like "nah".

MC: So would you maybe say, like, you almost feel like you have more experience under your belt now that you've actually gone through a hurricane?

RS: Yeah, no, I know what not to do and what *to* do when evacuating now. What, like, what to secure, you know. Like, that trampoline was not secure, just saying. That thing flew. We found it in the ditch like down the road and I was like "yep, that's mine".

MC: So you said your kids are just now getting ready to start school.

RS: Um, my ten year old, yes. They just opened up the Charlie Marshall for four to— fourth and through seventh. Um my Pre-K and my third, my third grader they don't start school maybe they're saying until the 15th, hopefully.

MC: So, how is that? How are you dealing with that?

RS: Well, um, my first, when school started, you know those little um, grade books, like at Walmart you know, just so then yeah, we got those and we've been having them do a page every day. We tried to get them into the Portland district because they said that they were opening up for the APISD, but that filled up so quick. I was like "well, that was our", I lost that option. So we just kept them with us and kept making them do their pages. My old— my daughter's pretty excited to return. She's the one that likes school. My third, my third grader, no.

MC: Really?

RS: She hates school, because she doesn't get good grades so it puts her down.

MC: So I'm sure she's just thinking "extended vacation".

RS: Yeah, she's happy. My little boy wants to go back to school because it's just Pre-K. It's just socializing. He's like "friends!" but yeah.

MC: So have they said how long they're going to be in school, like are they going to extend through winter break? Or extend—

RS: I don't know. They still, when I asked them they still said that they still didn't have details for everything it's just, so far they just extended the school day by like an hour. So instead of getting out at like three they get out around like 3:40 and instead of starting eight they start at like seven-something. So they just go like an extra hour a day. And they still, I still don't have details. I hope they do something to make up for the days lost because I know that if they don't go nine—for 90% of the school year, they can be held back. And I really don't want my two daughters that are in older grades to be held back just because, you know. That would not be good for their emotional-ness. They'd lose all their friends and—

MC: So overall, how has this experience been, dealing with a hurricane?

RS: Tiring. Exhausting. Because our school started up a whole lot sooner than my kids schools. And I'm realizing the back of the house, and I've been going back every weekend to fix things up, because, so me and my boyfriend and my brother and his girlfriend and my mom and my dad. You know, the kids try to help out but they're not very much help, um, (laughs) we go back every weekend, and then sometimes during the week so yeah it's been exhausting trying to juggle that and schoolwork and trying to make deadlines and things so, I'm pretty tired.

MC: How do you feel about the way that the school system and even like Texas A&M Corpus Christi like how they've handled it? Do you think we've been okay with reaching out and helping people that have actually been effected by the hurricane? I wouldn't know because I wasn't really effected.

RS: I never asked for help. I'm pretty much, I don't really ask for help, I just either get through it, you know, or I'll figure something out.

MC: Did you feel like, pushing um—

RS: I'm sure that they like, that they are helping because I've gotten many emails, you know at the beginning it was like, "anybody that was effected by Hurricane Katrina [Harvey], please talk to us, we'll help you in any ways", but like I just didn't do it so—

MC: So were you okay with the push back? I think it was about a week, we just started like a week later than we should have. Did you think that was enough time for people who were effected?

RS: Well, that's a hard question because I know other people were more effect then I, like lost the whole house so they probably had to drop out I'd imagine. I still haven't heard from

my friend who lived in Rockport who, Justin, because I still haven't heard from him, so I don't know if he had to drop out this semester. I don't know, that's a hard question. Because I needed this semester (laughs) to start but I know others didn't so—

MC: So, I know since I wasn't effected, I was, kind of happy (both laugh). I mean it's a terrible situation but when here you have an extra week of summer vacation and you're a student whose taken summer classes the whole summer you're kind of like "I'm okay with that, that's fine". Um, but I wonder also, for the people that were effected, if that was enough time for them, and if it wasn't, how the school was trying to assist them.

RS: Yeah.

MC: So, but it sounds like you—

RS: That's a good question.

MC: You were fine. You, I mean you're making it here to campus.

RS: Yeah, I had to. That's, that's the reason I found Schlitterbahn because when I heard the school, the start-back date, the start date I was like "I cannot drive from Jourdanton to school, you know, three hours back and forth, just to attend school" so I was like "I'm going to find myself a hotel that was close". So I got lucky, but yeah. It's, I don't know, I'm happy that the school started whenever it did because I didn't want to have to drop a semester because I'm going to graduate soon and I was like, I don't want to extend that (laughs).

MC: So how's your family doing now, now that y'all are getting ready to move back into the house?

RS: We're good. I mean— hm, we're good.

MC: Less stressful than the beginning of the situation?

RS: I don't know, I mean we still— I know everybody is stressing about like, how to fix things and when to fix it and if we're going to have help to fix it and clean up. We still haven't cleaned up the yard very much. Because we've been working on the inside so we can live back in it. So I guess I'm happy to be moving back into the house because I'm tired of hotels and eating out all the time. That's so unhealthy. Uh, I really want my home-cooked meals (laughs). I love cooking. Um yeah, I would say the same stress level.

MC: Well you've pretty much answered all of my questions that I had for you. Um, was there anything else I could've asked that you wanted to discuss about your experience with Harvey?

RS: No, I pretty much told you everything.

MC: Yeah you did (both laugh), even the turkey. The turkey was fine.

RS: (laughs) the turkey lived. Gobbles lived. Yes he did.

MC: That's his name? Gobbles?

RS: Yes. His name is Gobbles, because he goes "gobble gobble gobble gobble". (McKenna laughs)

MC: I'm sure your kids were happy to hear that he was fine?

RS: Yeah they love Gobbles. They helped me name him. So, and he's still fine. He's just walking around the back yard that has no fence and all kinds of (inaudible). And the one cat survived. We had a— well it's not our cat, it's just a stray cat that comes over and eats and we feed it. We found it there. I mean he's got a cut on him but I was like "how did you put— okay, it's good to see you".

MC: Well if there's nothing else that you want to discuss and you've answered all of my questions then I think it's safe to say that we've finished this interview. So I just wanted to say thank you for taking the time to meet with me and discuss this stressful situation. I know that's probably not always the easiest thing to do so I just wanted to say thank you for that.

RS: You're welcome.

MC: And that will conclude our interview.

End Recording