

James Simmons

Interviewed by J. Cullen Mouton

Beaumont, Texas – 6 April 2006

Subject: Mirabeau's Storm: The Effects of Hurricane Rita on Lamar University

Mouton: It is 2:05 on April the 6<sup>th</sup>. I'm in room 100 of the apartment building on the Lamar University campus with Dr. James Simmons, president of Lamar University, and we're here to talk about Hurricane Rita and its effects on Lamar University. First, I would like to say thank you for finding time in your schedule.

Simmons: You're welcome.

Mouton: I know you haven't been feeling well, but we appreciate that, appreciate you letting us do this. Just wanted to let you know that I am recording this file in the library. Just wanted to make sure that's okay with you.

Simmons: Sure.

Mouton: First of all, what were your first impressions when you heard that the storm might be coming here amidst the storm warning?

Simmons: Great concern, obviously. You know, we all went to bed, I guess it was Wednesday night, assuming that it was gonna hit Matagorda Bay, but my wife woke me up at about 5 o'clock, it'd turned and headed right for us. And our first concern was we had a large number of students who we needed to evacuate who were looking to us for transportation, and of course Dr. Johnson had that all lined up so early that morning, I guess it was Thursday morning, we loaded the buses and got the students outta here, at about 10 o'clock. And then, you know, everybody was scattering, but we had a pretty good skeleton crew hanging around the University that stayed that battened down the hatches.

Mouton: Yes sir. Was there any kind of existing evacuation plan for something like this, any kind of a structure already set up in place?

Simmons: Sure. I mean, you know, it's almost yearly it seems that we go through this process where we - the problem is, it's been a dress rehearsal in the past, everybody left Wednesday thinking, well we're gonna have a few days off, and be back, see you Monday, but thank goodness we did have a plan. And we followed it very carefully. It's very fortunate that we had no loss of life, and property damage was significant, but if we wouldn't have taken the precautions we had taken it could have been worse.

Mouton: What kind of precautions were those? Was there any kind of supporting help with the buildings?

Simmons: The normal procedure is to make sure that all flying objects are either laid flat or removed so they will not be missiles, cover all computers that are subject to rising water. We learned a lot from this hurricane. You know, make sure your diesel fuel and your gasoline fuel tanks [unintelligible] are full (3:03). That came in very handy during the next twenty-four days. Keep a skeleton crew of police here at all times. In case there's looting after the event, then make sure everyone has evacuated. The police systematically will secure the building and make sure it's locked.

Another big lesson we learned was turn off your emergency generators at the appropriate time because—we were real fortunate that ours was actually disengaged by the storm. But if they would've come on—because our entire computer and communication infrastructure was wet, it could've caused all kinds of damage. They're all fail-safe systems that would've stopped it from damage, but you never can tell, so our new thing is make sure that the emergency generator is turned off and not turned on until we've checked to make sure that everything is clean and clear. And then there's a lot of small things. The students and faculty fail to realize that they could be gone for a month, so the next hurricane we're gonna tell them to make sure you take everything you're gonna need for the next month, cause there's a good chance the campus could be flooded. And make sure all the tennis court strings are cut down. That's one thing we just never assumed would have that kind of wind damage, but it was a great lesson. We had a great plan, I think, and we followed it.

Mouton: What about- you would mention the students that were here- I'm assuming you mean the dorm students.

Simmons: Dorm students and several many international students who didn't have transportation. We felt a real strong obligation to any student who lived within walking distance of campus who could not leave in a vehicle. We wanted to make sure they got to safety. It's kind of an interesting story. The only place we could secure was a place in Corrigan, Texas, and it was a religious encampment. They agreed to take the students. It housed them and fed them for the duration of the storm.

Well I get a call Sunday evening, from the encampment. The roofs had blown off, there was no water and they were out of food.

Mouton: Unbelievable.

Simmons: Cause, again, we thought we moved them out of harm's way. And actually, the storm went right over Corrigan. That's another lesson we learned. We're gonna send them to Alpine, Texas, or San Marcos, Texas, or you know, move them to a state institution that we know is out of harm's way. But, I called Stephen F. Austin that evening and talked to the president, and a great concern about these students, we couldn't locate buses, you couldn't get bus companies, telephone lines were down. They had very limited communication.

Another lesson we learned, we purchased satellite telephones so that wherever we send the students, they'll have a satellite phone, as well the president and the vice president and the fiscal plan director, so that we can stay in communication regardless of the local telephone situation. And I called the Stephen F. Austin president Tito Guerrero, who said, "I'll see what I can do, I'll call you back." And he called me back about 10:30 Sunday night and said, "As soon as it's daylight, I'm sending all of our buses." I mean it still kinda shakes me up. I mean, we were in such a dilemma to have someone step up like that, and then they housed the students until we could get them to other facilities. Because they were a storm



center point where people could come and all the facilities could handle all kind of storm damage, but they put our students in their gym right under the Lamar University flag. We're in the same conference, and [they] housed them and fed them and transported them, and what a great service for them to do for us.

Mouton: Definitely an unbelievable gesture. When was the decision—I'm assuming we had a little bit of a heads up here at Lamar as far as seeing students go—to backtrack us a little bit, how and when was the decision made to cancel classes?

Simmons: We made the decision Wednesday morning at 10 o'clock to finish class, the 1 o'clock class, call off the rest of the classes. And we really got not enthusiastic support for that decision, until after the fact.

Mouton: Hindsight being 20/20, everyone knows you made the right call.

Simmons: I'm telling you, that's one of the best decisions in the history of this University. It really gave us time to get our students and faculty to safety.

Mouton: During the storm we heard that there was a sort of, you mention, a skeleton crew here, sort of a small contention of people—who was that?

Simmons: The police. Chief Fontenot and four fellow officers stayed, and they stayed in the stairwell of the Gray Library second floor. And they had boats and canoes, anticipating rising water, and they knew they could launch them easily from the dock, so they had a really good plan. But, about halfway through the storm, the roof blew off. And if you remember when you came back, that big black smudge on the side of the library, the roof banged on the library. It was a terrible noise. It was actually kinda shaking the building. The roof blew off so water was pouring down the stairwell. So they thought the structure was being compromised, the integrity of the structure was gonna be threatened. So in the middle of the storm, they left the library and made their way to the police station, which is right across, a pretty good walk during that storm, and there were no windows in the police station. And they also had some boats in the police station in case they needed to ride in water. You know, that was probably a very harrowing experience for those gentlemen.

Mouton: I can imagine that's gonna be something to see, thinking you're safe in the stairwell, and here comes the water. Who sort of made the first go around of the campus after the storm was over? Was it the police, or were there emergency officials who came there?

Simmons: Well, Sunday, I came back Sunday, I got here about noon. And Saturday, I had contacted contractors, and told them to meet me here, Monday morning, never realizing what we were gonna find. So, Davis brothers, other contractors from Port Neches, we had about six qualified construction managers here. The university has about 155 buildings. No electricity. You had the walk in the unbelievable heat through these buildings with a flashlight, trying to assess the damage. We immediately, Gerald McKay did a wonderful job, our plant manager, he had people on roofs Monday morning, repairing the roofs, because, if you remember, there was supposed to be another hurricane in the gulf. We were scared that it was gonna come follow the same path, so we knew we had to get the roofs prepared. So, the first major effort was getting the water out of the buildings, and we hired two companies that came in, and basically they would heat the building, suck the water out, and then do a mold remediation process. Barry Johnson, Monday morning, set up 50 to 60 flip charts over there in the

police office, which was kind of our ground zero. We prioritized the repair process. And on the first flip chart was the library, which we thought was the top priority. With all of the books and research, and that was our top priority. And then as we went through the process of assigning a building, with all these six people, we all walked buildings and came back, and while they were doing that, we were prioritizing the buildings that we knew we had to have up. We knew that the Maes was in trouble, Education, Business, et cetera.

So ultimately, we prioritized from one all the way down to sixty where the contractors needed to start. And on these flip charts, we put the damage that we found—ceiling damage, wind damage, roof damage, carpet damage—so that as the contractors came in—of course, you didn't have electricity, so you didn't have computers at that point, you know you had flashlights—kind of a nightmare. But Barry Johnson with these flip charts got the whole process started and we had a construction manager professional from Austin, a guy named Mark Hopper, who those Austin people sent down to help us, and he walked into the ground zero room and saw what we were doing and he said, "Well this is perfect. I couldn't do any better." But he stayed through the whole process to advise us and help us and some great advice he gave us was, several days into this, you need to have some students come back, your student leaders come back, because they need to see what you're seeing, so they can spread the word, because most of our students had no idea. They thought we were purposely keeping them off the campus.

Mouton: Really?

Simmons: Yeah, and kids in the dorms were furious. We wouldn't let them into the dorms. We couldn't, we were pumping 170 degrees of heated air into the entire complex because 8800 rooms were wet. And they had all of their clothes, and their bedding was all wet, and we had to take it all out and take it to a cleaner's and clean it, and we put it back into the rooms. All that was going on.

Mouton: Yes, sir.

Simmons: And we were getting all kinds of criticism from dorm kids about, you gotta let us in, and if a kid came back and needed medical supplies or something in an emergency basis, he would get a police, and the policeman would go to the room, get it, and bring it back, because we could not, liability wise, let the students go through this unbelievable heat and construction processes going on. So it was very interesting. We found out about a week later too, that there were also 800 ice boxes in those dorm rooms that needed to be emptied. The Biology building, about two weeks later, we discovered had feral pigs, and all of the reptiles and fish tanks had to be, you know... how they did it in 23 days is just a miracle.

Mouton: Was that their time scale from the get go or did they think it was gonna take longer than that?

Simmons: You know, we arbitrarily said that because that was about the maximum time we could take and still finish and give students a Christmas break. If we had gone a week longer, we would have had to come back in January to finish this semester. And kids graduating, and that would have been a nightmare. I'll tell you for the first week, most of us didn't think we'd have the semester at all. I thought it'd be sometime in April before we got anything back, I mean, if you could've seen it, day one, literally thousands of people were out there working. It was an unbelievable job.



Mouton: Were any of the structures—I mean, you mentioned the dorms being basically uninhabitable—were any of the structures really at danger to collapse, at all?

Simmons: Well, of course, we had a structural engineer out here, a firm, going through every building, assuring us that there were no structural damage because we didn't know. You saw the Montagne Center, I mean, it did just look—I don't know if you saw it or pictures—but it was just unbelievable. I mean I'll show you some pictures for you, I'll show you a booklet we have, it's got pictures. We were worried about the library because of what the police had told me. The Gladys City was just, you know, all those structures were just mutilated, you seen those? Walls blown off, roofs blown off. As far as danger, we didn't have ceiling material falling, most of that occurred during the storm. So I don't think it was any real life threatening structural damage. Of course, we didn't know that for three or four days.

Mouton: Better to be safe than sorry. Well you've covered pretty much everything... When was the call made to bring everyone back to school?

Simmons: Well, we set up, as our plan called for an immediate communication system. We personally contacted all of the local media to tell them that we were out here, we were working. If you had questions, call Austin, we gave them the number. That was our system in Austin, and they had all the information there. Then we got a website up off campus, I think we used one off University of Texas's alternate site. When you went to [www.lamar.edu](http://www.lamar.edu), it brought up this fake—well not fake, but an alternate site where we could give information. And then we had a blog on that website. Where if you missed somebody or needed to talk to somebody, kids, students, faculty and staff could talk to each other. And that was really helpful. And then about two weeks after the event, Dr. Doblin and his staff came up with all kinds of different scenarios about when we would start, when we would stop, what we'd have to do to class, and when we could finish. We selected what we thought was the best one, and that was the twenty three days. And we really decided, let's aim for that, put it out there, give people some hope, and if we have to change it, we'll just change it. But if we don't set a definite time, we were afraid students would leave or go somewhere else or think we weren't gonna open, so we had set the date. And then everybody just broke their backs to meet that day. As a matter of fact, Tuesday we got back, we had a women's basketball game in the Montagne center. Unbelievable, considering it was flooded, half the roof was blown off, and every seat was wet.

Mouton: Unbelievable. What kind of communication were you getting about the Port Arthur and Orange campus?

Simmons: Very little damage. We got that report early on, I say very little, compared to our damage, theirs was very little.

Mouton: Really?

Simmons: Very minor.

Mouton: And did those kids wind up finishing the semester?

Simmons: All of them did. We all went back to school within a day of each other.

Mouton: There was some strange misinformation running around, we thought that Port Arthur had never gone back to school. You talked about the twenty-three-day plan giving you enough time to get

everybody finished and let people graduate. Was there some sort of state agency or something that you had to go through?

Simmons: The coordinating board gives you minimum class time, meeting times. You know, where you would have to meet forty five hours within a semester to make it approved by the coordinating board. So we had to fit all these things into these prescribed time frames, knowing that, again, if you went twenty four days, or twenty five, or twenty six, then you're looking at coming back and getting late, and not graduating December the twenty second. Cause we really didn't think we could go the twenty fourth, you know you couldn't go right after the day before Christmas, I mean, we just didn't think that would work. We thought the twenty second was the last day we could actually graduate. I think that was a Thursday. So, it worked. And we had graduation in the Montagne center. And we had all kinds of alternate sites picked out for graduation day, you know we actually booked the civic center, we thought we'd have to go to the civic center.

Mouton: What about the extended refund and drop date deadlines when we got back? Was that any kind of state mandate or was that a Lamar decision?

Simmons: That was a Lamar decision. We wanted to just be as accommodating as we could, realizing that our students are not only affected by the school, but many of their homes and families were pretty devastated by the storm too.

Mouton: How many students in all took advantage of that?

Simmons: I think 800. We lost about 800 students. That many did not come back. I don't know if they all took advantage of that, but they all could've taken advantage of it. Then if we started the spring semester, we were right back where we started. So obviously those 800 came back.

Mouton: They just needed some time to get their things in order. What about grades? As far as across the board, did you get any kind of report on whether GPA has on-the-whole suffered from the storm?

Simmons: You know, the report I got from the students I visited with, the faculty I visited with, everybody was bending over backwards to accommodate our faculty and our students so I wouldn't imagine—I wouldn't have imagined that if you were a student, you may have gotten the benefit of the doubt during this period, because I think the faculty were very caring and very concerned about our students' morale and I'd say I just saw the faculty going the extra mile.

Mouton: Yes sir, absolutely. And no comment from the interviewer for that one. I think the faculty was great after the storm. How much of a monetary disaster in sum, I mean, if you could even wrap it around a number.

Simmons: Forty million.

Mouton: Forty million. And that's counting structural damage, students getting refunds, the whole nine yards.

Simmons: That's lost revenue, and then renovation, repair.

Mouton: And is that just an out-and-out loss, there's really no way to recover that?



Simmons: We'll be reimbursed by the state. We're in the process of being- FEMA will take up a certain part of that, and then where they leave off the state—we have insurances from the state that they'll come in and make us whole.

Mouton: Unbelievable. Was there any kind of staff losses, people quitting or retiring?

Simmons: No, we really didn't—I don't think—we may have lost one or two staff members, I don't know of any faculty. Matter of fact, we didn't lose any dorm students. All of our dorm students came back.

Mouton: Really? Interesting. That's unbelievable. I mean I guess-

Simmons: Plus, they were from out of town, they weren't affected by the hurricane.

Mouton: That's a good point. Yeah, the families don't have much to worry about. I mean, knowing what you know now, is there anything that you would've done differently?

Simmons: Well, like I told you, we're revising our emergency plan and incorporating many, many lessons that we learned. And we'll have that ready in the next couple of weeks, I hope. I know we'll have it ready by hurricane season, but it's just a lot of little things that we notice, that you read all of these publications and journals about experts who tell you what to do, but you can also, you know, get a pretty good idea that they really never have been through it. We're the experts. And I think our plan—we've had the President of Brownsville brought a whole team of about fifteen other people here to visit with our people, so we could tell them what to expect and how we dealt with it. As they develop their plan. Cause they're also in harm's way, could be. They haven't been. But I think all of the Gulf coast—and the Atlantic coast universities could've been through this. If they haven't, you know it's probably just, looking at the hurricane seasons coming up, there's supposed to be great deal more hurricanes in the basin in the next ten years, so there may not be if you get hit, it's probably when get hit.

Mouton: Do you think there's any way we can get things we've learned out to those universities?

Simmons: Oh, we will, and we have, as matter of fact, I wanna give you a presentation that has been made to members of all of the state universities in the country. This presentation was made by our provost.

Mouton: Unbelievable. Unfortunately, we had to be the guinea pigs in this deal.

Simmons: Well, there's quite a few you know, we're not the Louisiana schools McNeese, University of New Orleans, Tulane, Xavier.

Mouton: All of the Florida schools.

Simmons: Yeah, and the Florida schools, they... some of those have been through it, through it, and through it. But again, I think those in Florida probably have building codes that better prepared them for the kinds of storms that they—not that you can ever prepare, but for instance, we had roofs that were designed to withstand ninety-mile-per-hour wind. Our new roof can withstand 150 miles an hour. But at the time, ninety miles was the industry standard. That's what you did. It's kinda like in California, when they have an earthquake, they reevaluate the building code, and decide they need to up 'em, that's kinda what happened here, too. You know, you're gonna see some hurricanes clips to get the roof specifications and all kinds of things that historically, no one ever thought of, until this hurricane here.

Mouton: What about... is there any repairs that's still ongoing, or is everything pretty much all done?

Simmons: Oh yeah, roofs are ongoing, we're still in the process of repairing roofs, process of Gladys City, we still have work to do there, little matter construction jobs all over the campus that we're doing bit by bit, nothing that hampers operations or class at this point. A lot of it was just cosmetic.

Mouton: Just going behind the scenes while everyone else is doing their thing. Well again, I wanna say thank you. I appreciate it.

Simmons: You're welcome!