

20th Anniversary of Hurricane Hugo's Impact on
MUSC
Oral History Project

Interview with Sherry Gillespie Miller, RN, MSN
July 17, 2009

Interviewer: Brooke Fox, MUSC University Archives

Location: 261 Calhoun St., Suite 340

Brooke Fox: The following is an oral history interview with Sherry Gillespie Miller, RN for the Hurricane Hugo 20th Anniversary Oral History Project. The date is Friday, July 17th 2009. The interviewer is Brooke Fox, MUSC University Archivist.

I'd like to start off by asking you, what was your position at MUSC in September 1989?

Gillespie Miller: I was the director of nursing for pediatric and maternal infant nursing, which was basically women's and children's services, in-patient services.

Brooke Fox: How long had you been in that position?

Gillespie Miller: I'd been here for sixteen years before that. And I don't remember, probably two years maybe before the storm.

Brooke Fox: Okay.

Gillespie Miller: And that could be wrong.

Brooke Fox: All right. Describe the days leading up to Hurricane Hugo's landfall. What was the atmosphere here on campus? Were people starting to get worried or...?

Gillespie Miller: Well, I don't remember people really getting that worried to begin with. I think I remember coming in on Monday morning, and they called all of the nursing directors and the administrators together and we started meeting to plan what would happen if the hurricane hit. And I remember thinking on Monday, this is probably, you know, we've done this a million times. This is going to be the same as everybody else's.

And then by Tuesday, it seemed a little more serious and we were talking about backup generators for the Children's Hospital and things that made it seem a little more real; how much water the military could bring in, all those kinds of things. And then by Wednesday it was definite. You knew when you came in to work on Thursday morning; I was going to be here for several days. So...

Brooke Fox: What types of plans did you put together in the days leading up to the storm?

Gillespie Miller: Well, we looked at where all the emergency power was, you know, where it was at, was that all working fine. How long would the water system work because we had always never really lost water in previous events. Looked at—since I was responsible for the Children's Hospital, the generators for the Children's Hospital were on the first floor. And so we had to determine what type of surge, storm surge, it could take without wiping out the generators.

So, that's what I remember spending a lot of time on because we were having to look at what would happen if, and the plans were we were going to get a backup generator on the roof, which—that doesn't sound any better really than the first floor. But on—and I don't remember now if it was Wednesday night or Thursday, they informed me they couldn't do that. So, I had to develop an evacuation plan if the power failed in the Children's Hospital to evacuate to the adult hospital. So...

Brooke Fox: Were you in charge of the evacuating the children, the patients...?

Gillespie Miller: Well, I would have been in charge of seeing that the staff did it. I was responsible for all the nursing staff in both the Children's Hospital and in labor and delivery, and the nurseries and women's services, and in partum, postpartum. And I was covering for another, for a peer who had

the medical units in the main hospital, who got to go to a trip to Florida, and so missed the entire event.

Brooke Fox: Did it run fairly smoothly, the preparations?

Gillespie Miller: Oh, there were little glitches like the neonatal ICU, as you know, two walls of it is windows so I remember having to argue that those windows needed to be boarded up. And in the PICU on the other side has two walls of windows, and it took—I don't remember who all I had to argue with, but we finally got the NICU boarded up, and only one side of the PICU, the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, because they ran out of plywood, because they had used it at the Wickliffe House, which was important too.

So, little things like that that, you know, you thought would be important. Later you realize there were some other things you should have thought of. But it was—people were organized, we were organizing the staff as to who would come in, who would stay home. I don't think staff were that anxious at that point in time. That showed up the next year when we thought we were going to get hurricane. The people who had been here were much more anxious but...

Brooke Fox: What floors were the ICU or the PICU on?

Gillespie Miller: The neonatal ICU and the PICU were on the eighth floor of the Children's Hospital, and then there was another infant toddler unit on the eighth floor, and then there were three children's units on the seventh floor.

Brooke Fox: How many nurses were assigned to stay?

Gillespie Miller: Roughly we had half our staff stay, and I don't remember that in detail twenty years ago, other than we make sure that we have enough. You know, there had been so many times when you think that storms were

coming that you don't. That it's really a close judgment call as to when you start discharging patients who can go home. And it would take approximately, this is a meeting I was at this year, it would take us about seventy-two hours to evacuate the Medical University Hospital.

So, that's way in advance if when the storms going to come, so I don't remember there being discussions about evacuating the patients other than when were going to try to encourage the doctors to discharge. So, I don't remember the census, other than my neonatal ICU was very busy. I remember that there were a lot of babies on ventilators and so we weren't at full census but we certainly weren't at the low, like the census would be over the Christmas holidays so it was full. And then you always have women in labor coming in during storms. So...

Brooke Fox: All right, okay. Did that happen or...?

Gillespie Miller: I know we had some deliveries. Even though I was responsible for that side, so much of what happened was happening in the Children's Hospital. So, I think we delivered a couple but I don't remember specifically.

Brooke Fox: Okay. So the morning of when the storm hit that Thursday, can you describe—do you recall what was going on that particular day or were you just running all over the hospital?

Gillespie Miller: Well, I don't remember running all over. I remember that, you know, we had charged the staff what they needed to bring with them, you know, as far as a sleeping bag and some other things, you know. I remember telling everybody to bring peanut butter and a loaf of bread. So, we came in that morning and then all of the leadership team would have been called together and we had set times to come get updates in the 2 West

amphitheater. And really things proceeded pretty much as normal even into the early evening.

You know, we were checking on making sure everybody was okay, the patients were okay, nobody was upset. It was about, I want to say ten-thirty, it might have been nine-thirty, I was actually in the main hospital with some of my counterpart directors, sort of, I guess, just talking about what we're going to do next when my beeper went off to say that the windows in the Children's Hospital in-patient units were blowing in. So, that's when it started and I don't remember stopping for about the next twenty-four hours after that.

We got over there and I guess the direction that the storm came, I mean, those are very heavy windows if you've ever looked at them and they were blowing in. So, the first thing we did was, we had to evacuate all the children out of their rooms into the hallways of the units thinking that would be far enough. But then, I don't know if you've ever been on those units, but there's glass walls, I mean, windows into each unit so you can see the kids. And so there was another set of windows so we eventually decided that that wasn't going to be enough and we started evacuating into the main hallways of the Children's Hospital.

So, the kids got quite excited about that, they thought that was sort of fun as a matter of fact. And so we got those—that's the seventh floor. The eighth floor, the other unit beside the ICU—obviously we couldn't move the ICUs at that point in time though I had this designed, an evacuation plan, for how we would do that. We were going to have to evacuate the PICU over to the adult burn unit. We were going to create an area for them to function there if we lost power. And so, what I remember the most happening is being on the eighth floor, because that wind kept getting stronger, and I guess the windows were affected more there.

We eventually cleaned out a storage room, a large storage room on the eighth floor, which had no windows and was just an inside area, and moved as many of the infants and toddlers into that room as we could, and then had to still use the hallways. At some point in time, in that when all that was happening, the eighth floor connected to the main hospital through the newborn nursery, and this is probably later into the night, one o'clock something like that, the ceiling between the children's hallway, and that room started to fall down. So we couldn't evacuate that way. So that's when we started going, "Okay, we're going to use this closet and we're moving them out into the hallways."

So at some point in time we were—I remember we had talked about how much of a surge we could have before we would lose the emergency power. So, we were down in the generator room looking to see how high the water was, and it was probably at the most a foot from going over. And so we were discussing did we need to go ahead and evacuate the building when the word came that the windows in the PICU, the wall that didn't get boarded up, had blown in. So, we're running up eight flights of stairs. That's when they almost had to admit me, I think.

And so then we had to evacuate those kids out of the PICU, and so we did evacuate them over to the adult burn unit, and right after we got over there, the main hospital lost their backup power. So, the nurses were having to hand ventilate the kids that were on ventilators, and the Children's Hospital never lost power. Of course we didn't know that at that time. And somewhere through the course of that, the tenth floor, the Palmetto, what was known as the Palmetto Pavilion then, the roof began to leak and be pulled off, and insulation was falling down and coming down the stairwells.

So, they made the decision to move those patients over to the Children's Hospital. So, we would have in the hallway, we would have an adult

patient in a bed, who of course, our staff didn't know, then we'd have kids, and whatever, and when the height of the storm was, the noise of the storm was the loudest, some of the children, the patients that were children, would climb in the bed with the adult patient.

So, it was an interesting experience. And then when it all began to die down, one of my memories is that about two-thirty or three in the morning, we were passing out juice and cookies to calm the kids down, but we were giving it to the adults too. So it was a very much a unique experience that I would hope we don't ever have to live through again.

Brooke Fox: So the kids, throughout that they—except for being a little scared and getting in to the bed with the adults—they generally were...

Gillespie Miller: They generally did fine. The parents were more—I remember my office, I mean, we literally pushed beds anywhere we could, so there was a little alcove that you went through to get to my office. And there was a bed beside it, and it was a little girl from the oncology unit. She had cancer and her parents were very upset. But I remember her saying to me, she sort of, you know, motioned me to come down close and she said, “Is this the storm? Is it going to get us?” And I said, “No, we’re going to be okay.”

And we talked for a little while and I said, “Your mom and dad are right here. Everything’s going to be okay.” And I remember her because she died about a week later. Her cancer was very advanced and we didn’t—twenty years ago, we didn’t save nearly as many kids as we do today. But she just thought it was quite fun that it was coming. Somewhere in all of that, my staff never got the experience. These are things that I learned afterwards. When it—I mean, because it was loud, it sounded like a train. I mean, all the things you hear, it sound like a freight train going in on that end of the building where we were going, between going over to the

main hospital, you felt like you were outside in the wind. That's how much wind you felt.

So, somewhere during that, somebody had given out the instructions that the staff needed to put on armbands with their name on it in case something happened to the building. Well, I never knew that so my staff never got told that because I was too busy dealing with ceilings coming down and windows blowing in. So, the other areas that I was responsible for, I called and said, "Somebody's got to look out for them because I couldn't get over there." And I know there was an incident, because this was in the paper, on one of the medicine units I was responsible for were a nurse—her arm was being pulled out or something, the window was sucking, and we had—they had to get her in so...

But then it was at about I think four or five that morning, you know, we got patients, I mean, everybody was going back to sleep and, you know, the worst of it—I always believed that God looked out for us in that it didn't happen in the daytime. I think people would have been—there would have been far more injuries if people could have seen what was happening outside. But since they couldn't, you know, and weren't out in it, that was better.

Brooke Fox: So, describe the day after when you first saw the damage, when you went back into the ICU and PICU to look or did you...?

Gillespie Miller: No, we moved them back. I think at that point in time they were able to come board up the windows. I mean find something to board up the rest of the windows. Really they were able to move back in, I would say the next day, I don't remember that specifically. What became the problem then was because of the limited power, we only had so much compressed air to run the ventilators. And the neonatal ICU was full or could only

take—we could only handle so many children on a ventilator with what the results of the storm damage were.

So, I had to ask the doctor's could we move—so we actually moved babies. The Greenville Hospital system came down and got some of the babies on the ventilators and took them to their hospital so that we could free up because we had ladies in labor who were having small babies who would probably need the ventilator. So, that's what I remember most about the next two days. I mean there was stuff hanging down, you know, I mean, the environmental services crew came and got the water cleaned up very quickly and we went on.

I remember this is probably two days afterwards. I came on Thursday night and didn't go home until Sunday. So, the days sort of run together. But I can remember the thing we were most excited about, this is probably two or three days later when we were what's now—back then it was called the Two West Conference Room, and that was sort of command central for the administrators to do whatever we needed to do. And when we heard that there was ice coming, that somebody in North Carolina was running their ice plant twenty-four hours a day, to send us ice, because we didn't, we just didn't have all those things, so. And then the first morning that we went down to the cafeteria, and there was grits, they were hot, instead of just cold stuff. I mean little things like that stick in your mind.

Brooke Fox: Do you recall if there were a lot of glass or—that had blown out of the windows?

Gillespie Miller: No, it didn't so much break the windows as it just blew the whole structure in. It's like if there was rim around the—supposed to have these things to hold them in, and so it blew that in so they were able to repair

that. Now, I'm not sure that some of them still don't leak today because of it but they do that.

Brooke Fox: Did you have any damage in your office? Did you have an office in the building?

Gillespie Miller: Yeah, my office was fine. It was on the, it wasn't on the side that got the worst of the wind. I slept on a sleeping bag in there when—the first night, I think. The other thing that happened that I had to do, that's why I remember so much about Children's, I guess two days before the storm, we created the very first emergency day care center because the staff were saying, "I'm a single mother, I can't come to work," whatever. So, I remember having to go meet with Charlene Stewart, the CEO at that time, and then over to meet with Marion Woodberry, he was the vice president at that time to say, "We have to be able to do something or we're not going to have staff be able to come to work."

So, on the fifth floor of the Children's Hospital, you know, looking back you go, "Oh, my God. How could we have ever put it there?" But it was a big—we couldn't do it in the atrium where the kids play now because that was all glass on top of it, so we didn't feel like we could do that. So, we had a very long hallway and waiting room, open areas for the children's clinics. And so we created the very first childcare center there. So, some of my staff that were clinical nurse specialists in whatever, their job became to staff the emergency day care center. So...

Brooke Fox: Were there a lot of children there?

Gillespie Miller: I don't remember at all how many children there were. I mean we had some, we had young babies we had toddlers. I really placed them in charge and I said, "You're in-charge of this," and I said, "I got to go worry about the patients." So, we got it in place and after that our plans

[unintelligible]—I mean, what was scary about that now is, it was a whole wall of windows too. I mean, we could move them in further but—we probably could have found a better place, but...

Brooke Fox: So, how long in your opinion did it take before you felt that you were running back as normal as possible, business as usual?

Gillespie Miller: Probably by the end of that next week. As far as at work, it felt normal. I mean, home, people didn't have electricity in their houses for weeks, so. But we had power, we had water, staff would come take showers here because nobody had any water, you know, hot water at home. I don't remember when we reopened the outpatient areas. My bet it would have been that, you know, that full week after the storm, but I don't really remember that. That didn't stick in my brain. But I mean it felt normal coming to work.

The other thing was, you forgot how hot it was going to be when you don't have air conditioning. So we pretty much, you know, the dress code went away. So, staff were taking care of the kids wearing shorts and t-shirts because you were burning up. So I don't remember how long it took to get—I mean obviously they worked to get hospitals back on in full power, so I don't remember how long. It was a couple of days that we didn't have that, probably over that long week.

Brooke Fox: Did you have any patients come in because of the storm that were injured?

Gillespie Miller: No, there weren't a lot of injuries. And that's why I say, I believe it was because it was at night. There would have been a lot more had there been, at least not in my areas, we didn't have kids coming in. I think the day or so after we probably did have a lot pregnant people coming in.

Brooke Fox: Can you describe the first time you actually left the hospital, when you went outside, what the campus looked like?

Gillespie Miller: Well trees; there were things blown over. They arranged it so—I mean I didn't go home to stay until Sunday. But on Saturday, I lived on James Island, so you couldn't—they weren't letting anybody on the island. But on Saturday, they agreed that you could. So, I remember leaving for an hour to go check on my house.

And what I remember the most is driving over the Ashley River bridge and all these boats up on the highway or the embankment, and seeing how many trees were down. Just everywhere you went there were trees down. So, I don't know that you'd notice it as much on campus because we had so many buildings and we didn't—obviously we didn't have the amount of trees that you had out in the community.

Brooke Fox: So, what was your overall impression of how the university as a whole or the hospital responded to the storm?

Gillespie Miller: I think we did very well considering we've never been faced with anything like that before. Just as in any other situation you have lessons learned and emergency plans have been improved since then. We had too many people there. If I had to say the one thing that we didn't know, and so we had a lot of people that didn't necessarily have a specific function to do right at that moment but we weren't sure so we had all these people there and that has been reduced. We don't bring nearly as many people in. There are people who were, from what I hear, now I never got over to that side, but they were staying in their offices in the Clinical Science Building and that building got a lot of wind and rain.

So, but I think people reached out to help. One of my favorite memories, and I've always regretted that I don't remember her name, but it probably

had to be two days after, it wouldn't have been the very next day, so it's probably Saturday. I was in the command center and this nurse showed up and said, "I used to work here. I was a Children's Hospital nurse. I live in North Carolina now but I told my boss I had to come to work. And I was coming down here, she could fire me or not, but I was coming to help down here."

And I sent her somewhere to work and I never was able to thank her or anything. But I just remembered that that was the feeling that people just from other places pitched in, and sent stuff, and some company came to help out the employees and delivered pillows. I thought that's an odd thing to stick in your mind, but a big truck of pillows came in for the staff to take home for people who—I had a staff member whose house was completely destroyed. She lived in Awendaw, so she got home and she couldn't even find her washing machine. I mean, there was nothing left.

Actually, her property was near Dr. Edwards' property up there so they got really hard hit. But I mean I think—I mean services came back as quickly as they could. I think we communicated well during the storm so that when it was actually going on, we had access to, you know, to people that there was a need, someone came, you know, immediately. The building engineer crew were fantastic. I mean they were, you know, running to take care of this or take care of that.

So, I mean, I don't—I mean, I'm sure during the storm I probably thought this didn't go right. But, or you know, why'd we do this or something like that. But overall, I think, you know, given the scope of what we were dealing with, it went really well.

Brooke Fox:

So if you had to stay in the hospital during a storm again, would you?

Gillespie Miller: Yeah, I would if I needed to. I mean, I remember, I do remember times of being very nervous. I don't know that I would say frightened, but more, "Please help me keep all these people calm. If I can keep people calm then the patients will be calm and staff will be calm." And when that wind was whistling, you would—you're going, "Okay, what else can happen now?" But you just kept going and doing the next thing that had to happen and then it came together. So...

Brooke Fox: And about how long did you think the wind was [really blowing hard]...?

Gillespie Miller: The first wind was, like I said, somewhere between nine-thirty and ten-thirty, and I know it was for a couple of hours.

Brooke Fox: And then the eye came through.

Gillespie Miller: And then it came, you know, it came back. And I want to say it was not the first batch, but the second, you know, past the eye that is what blew the windows in the PICU, but I don't remember. But I do have a vivid picture of that water about this close to the generator, going over the wall protecting the generator, so. And one of the things that happened as a result of the storm, because we had to move the kids out into the hallways, needless to say main hallways didn't have a lot of emergency power.

So, one of the things that happened as a result of that afterwards is now the main hallways in the Children's Hospital have some emergency power outlets so should you ever have to do something like that again. So, you were able to take those things that you learned and do something different.

Brooke Fox: So, do you have any other stories that you want to share that you remember?

Gillespie Miller: I have a picture somewhere. Dr. Darby, he was the chairman of the department of pediatrics at that time. I remember being very frustrated because Dr. Othersen, who was the medical director at that time, we were standing in the hallway trying to decide which way we were going to evacuate these kids because the ceiling is coming down here, and what are we going to do. And he's running around taking pictures.

Brooke Fox: Dr. Othersen?

Gillespie Miller: No Dr. Darby was. And so afterward it was really great because you got to see some of what it looked like. So, you know, in the end it was really—I was glad he had done it. But at that time I was like, “Excuse me. I'm trying to decide where to put these kids right now. I don't need a camera in my face.” But...

Brooke Fox: Is he still around, Dr. Darby, or is he...?

Gillespie Miller: He's retired but he's still around somewhere.

Brooke Fox: Because I would like to, you know, speak...

Gillespie Miller: Yeah, I mean he's the one the research center's named for. And I know he comes in summer, you could arrange to talk to him, and Dr. Othersen is...

Brooke Fox: I've already talked to the Dr. Othersen.

Gillespie Miller: Does he talk about the kids in the hallway?

Brooke Fox: Oh, it's been a few weeks, and I don't recall. But I think, yeah, he talked about that.

Gillespie Miller: I just have this –and maybe its because it's one of the pictures so. Dr. Darby snapped a picture of us, and we're sitting right there. I'm trying to think other people that would still be here. Oh, there's a number of the staff I worked with in pediatrics who are still here that would've been there...

Brooke Fox: Well, if you think of them you can email me.

Gillespie Miller: Yeah, I'll have to—I'll have to think of the names, but there's a good number of people. And it's amazing how those of us who were here, like when I said, it doesn't seem like it was twenty years ago. We still think of it as if it was yesterday. It's much more vivid to us and hurricane season starts and I'm much more primed to pay attention to what's happening with hurricanes and what do we need to do. And I think people who weren't here at that time they go, "Why do you all keep talking about Hugo? That was so long ago." But for those of us who were here, particularly those at the hospital, it was very—when I got to my house, one of my neighbor's houses was completely destroyed.

A tree fell lengthwise down the middle of the house. And the woman was going to stay and my roommate at that time had insisted that no she had to leave. And she would've been killed if she stayed in that house. So, you know, you're much more—all my trees went to everybody else's houses. I was—my house was very fortunate. What else? I can't think of—people came in on Sunday. That's when we began to change out shifts, and because what we did with the staff that we kept, we divided them into like 12-hour shifts so—or in some cases, we would sleep them for six hours and then—but we worked that out among them and then the nurses in the unit would figure out, "We're going to do it this way." And so everybody really pitched in.

Brooke Fox: That's what I've heard the most. that everybody really kind of came together. It was an experience that really made it more of a community.

Gillespie Miller: Yeah, you just—I don't know, I just remembered that that was—when it was all over, my overwhelming feelings both from the hospital and just the community, even my neighborhood were that people worked together. And all those little things that you let come between you or that were petty little things that you complained about at work someday, they just weren't that important in the midst of all of this. And kids and adults could have juice and cookies even in the storm.

Brooke Fox: That's great. That's a great story. Well, if you don't have anything else...

Gillespie Miller: I don't think...

Brooke Fox: Thank you.

Gillespie Miller: You're welcome.

End of recording.