

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

Interview with H. Biemann Othersen, Jr., M.D.
June 24, 2009

Interviewer: Brooke Fox, MUSC University Archives

Location: Colbert Education Center and Library, Room 407

Brooke Fox: The following is an oral history interview with Dr. H Biemann Othersen, Jr. for the Hurricane Hugo 20th Anniversary Oral History Project. The date is June 24th 2009. The interviewer is Brooke Fox.

Okay Dr. Othersen, the recorder is now on.

Dr. Othersen: Okay.

Brooke Fox: What was your position at MUSC in 1989?

Dr. Othersen: Well I returned to MUSC after training in pediatric surgery. I came back here in 1965 as chief of pediatric surgery--well as the only person in pediatric surgery--so I was here for the building of the Children's Hospital. The Children's Hospital had just been completed before Hugo, it was I think 1987, the Children's Hospital was finished and Hugo hit in 1989. So I was not only the chief of pediatric surgery, but also the medical director of the Children's Hospital.

Brooke Fox: Okay, so Hurricane Hugo struck September 21st 1989.

Dr. Othersen: Right.

Brooke Fox: In the week or so leading up to the hurricane, what do you remember about that time, about preparations?

Dr. Othersen: Well, since I was the only person in pediatric surgery, I was always clinically busy. But as medical director of the Children's Hospital, I also participated in the administration alerts and warnings; and I must say that the administration was on top of it. They were well prepared. It looked like it was going to hit us. I remember seeing some news cast on the television and you could draw a line through Hurricane Hugo off the

course and straight line to Charleston, as if somebody had just set it up on a target--targeted it to Charleston, by forty-eight hours before the hurricane. And of course, hurricanes can change at any moment and we'd seen hurricanes that looked like they were going to hit Charleston and at the last moment turned up the coast. And everyone was hoping for that. But most people felt that it looked serious. It looked like it was going to hit us so we had fair warning.

Brooke Fox: As the head of pediatric surgery and in charge of Children's Hospital, what specific precautions did you take?

Dr. Othersen: Well, everyone was given an assignment and divided into groups. Those people who didn't need to be here were asked to leave so that there would be little strain on the facilities.

The biggest concern at the time was that the governor had ordered a mandatory evacuation. The hospital was not in favor of that because to evacuate sick patients, we felt was a greater risk than keeping them here in the hospital. Because everything we do in medicine, we have to balance risk against benefit. And to move a very sick patient, who happens to be on a ventilator, to move them somewhere beyond the reach of the hurricane would entail in itself a lot of risk. And looking back on it, I think we were justified in making that decision not to evacuate. Because I had an elderly aunt who was a resident at Bishop Gadsden and they evacuated the entire Bishop Gadsden. And of course, those patients are not on ventilators, they are just elderly. But they evacuated and took them to a motel up in Florence and that motel was hit with power loss. Water came up into the motel. My aunt was in real danger there, whereas if they had stayed at Bishop Gadsden there were no danger. You don't want to jump out of the frying pan and into the fire, and I think we made the right decision in not evacuating the hospital.

But other preparations that were made were to ask the nurses to be prepared to stay in the hospital. The emergency team that were deemed to be essential to the running of the hospital were also asked to bring in water, clothes, or whatever was needed to stay two or three days. Because it was felt that if there were a bad hurricane, the hospital might be isolated for a few days and you wouldn't be able to leave. So, the preparations were made for the team of people to stay. Specifically in places like the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, the NICU, where a lot of these small infants were on ventilators, and of course a lot of the ventilators are electrically powered. There was a nurse who was assigned to each bassinet, each child on a ventilator and that nurse was given a flashlight, and an Ambu bag or a bag to ventilate the child by hand, if need be.

The concern of course was that we would lose power and we would lose water. The hospital, the Children's Hospital, had an air-cooled generator, so we didn't depend on water. But the problem was it was on the first floor, and on the first floor it was then subject to being taken out by a storm surge. However, a wall had been built around it. The wall was about six to eight feet high so that the water would have had to come up in that basement six to eight feet. To get up into the basement then another six to eight feet to get over on that wall and we were really concerned about that air-cooled generator on the first floor. As it turned out, that was most reliable generator in the whole medical center because the Medical University Hospital, just adjacent to the Children's Hospital, had a water-cooled generator but it was on the fourth floor and we thought that was going to be our salvation. However, as it turned out, the water supply was knocked out and so that generator didn't work and all of those patients who needed electricity had to be brought over into the Children's Hospital because our generator worked during the entire hurricane.

It was interesting also that all the phone lines worked. I think all the phone lines in the city were underground and I could call home at the height of the hurricane without any problem; however, the electricity went out. There was plenty of warning and there was good preparation, and I think everybody on the staff was well prepared for the hurricane.

Brooke Fox: Were there a number of people--did you feel--was there fear? Like did the patients, were they really concerned about what was going to happen, were they aware of how...?

Dr. Othersen: Well, what we tried to do was to evacuate or discharge all patients who didn't absolutely need to be in the hospital. We discharged as many as we could; we didn't admit any new patients. There were no elective cases done for two or three days before the hurricane hit so that we wouldn't have any of those patients in the hospital recuperating. So the only patients left in the hospital were those who were really, really sick; who were on ventilators; who required intensive care; and we didn't have anybody in the hospital who was just recovering from operation or had a condition that could be treated at home or somewhere else. So that's the way we prepared for it, was getting out of the hospital all those who didn't really need to be in there for maintenance of their life-support systems.

Brooke Fox: So about how many patients do you think were in the hospital at that time?

Dr. Othersen: Gosh, I don't know.

Brooke Fox: But the hospital holds five hundred beds?

Dr. Othersen: Well, the total medical center was about five hundred beds and I think we were down to less than two hundred patients in the whole medical center. I know in the Children's Hospital, we were down to about half of, or less than half of our capability and the ones that we had mostly were children in the intensive care unit and the neonatal ICU. Those little prematures, there was no way we could send those home. And that's where most of our patients lay in the intensive care unit, in the pediatric ICU, or in the neonatal intensive care unit.

Brooke Fox: What floors are those?

Dr. Othersen: Those are on the top floors, the 8th floor of the hospital.

Brooke Fox: Okay, so you stayed on campus during the storm?

Dr. Othersen: Yes and stayed there the whole time.

Brooke Fox: Were you on the eighth floor or did you move around?

Dr. Othersen: Well, I went through the whole hospital. I remember as the hurricane was coming in, there was predicted to be a storm surge in front of the hurricane. Well as it turned out, the city was fortunate in that the hurricane hit us dead on--the eye passed right over Charleston. But the biggest storm surge is not right there; it's at the northeast corner and this is a very big storm. When you look at it on the satellite maps, it covered the entire area of South Carolina. The northwest corner of the approaching storm was not in Charleston, it was in McClellanville and Georgetown. So they got the storm surge of ten to fifteen feet, whereas we got six feet in Charleston. And I remember going down to the first floor of the Children's Hospital in the rear and watching the water come up the steps on the back of the Children's Hospital loading dock area and

you could watch the water. The first floor of the hospital was above ground level, but you could watch the water coming in and it went up to a height of about six-eight feet and then it receded but it never did threaten our generator which was very comforting to see.

Brooke Fox: What about the winds and everything?

Dr. Othersen: Well the winds were the real wicked things in that the wind was so strong that the windows, which were latched, were blown in and the hurricane pointed out some construction defects in the Children's Hospital. For one thing, it leaked like a sieve, the water poured in and I remember going around picking up wastebaskets and sticking them under the leaks all over the place.

Down in my office area on the fourth floor of the Children's Hospital--no, it's on the sixth floor of the Children's Hospital. The windows leaked like crazy and water was dripping in all over the place. Dripped all over the books, ruined a lot of my books but up on the patient floors it leaked there too, but the windows in the Children's Hospital were designed so that there was a latch that went into a recess in the window frame. There were two latches, one at the top and one at the bottom. And the idea was that those windows could be opened and brought in just a few inches so that you could reach through the opening with a squeegee and clean the outside windows so you wouldn't have to have a person suspended from the roof or whatever to wash the outside of the windows and it was good idea. But in the construction and the installation of those windows, the latches didn't go into the recesses in the frame very far. So that instead of going in all the way and being securely fastened, just the tips of the latches went into the recesses. And so, the wind was so strong it actually bent those windows a little bit. And when it bent them, the window would fly open and it flew open and of course then the glass would shatter and

the patient doors from the hallway into the rooms opened into the rooms. So that with all that wind coming in, it was impossible to open the doors. The wind was so strong; one person couldn't open a door.

So because of that, we had to move all of the patients into the halls because if the window in their room shattered, we couldn't get into the room because the wind just kept the doors shut. In the intensive care unit, the maintenance people, and I must say, the maintenance crew were really on top of things; they really responded all over the hospital and in the intensive care unit, they were putting up big sheets of plywood over the windows because we couldn't move those patients, they had to be in the unit on ventilators.

Brooke Fox: Is this during the storm?

Dr. Othersen: This is during the storm.

Brooke Fox: Or they didn't think about doing it before the storm?

Dr. Othersen: This was during the storm because they didn't realize how strong that wind would be and they thought, "This is a new hospital and the windows will hold." But they didn't hold. So, they started putting up big sheets of plywood. I watched a window that had been blown in, and the wind was pushing the plywood down. It took eight men to hold a sheet of plywood up there while somebody drilled holes and screwed it in. The force of that wind was really strong.

Brooke Fox: How long did that go on?

Dr. Othersen: Well, that went on for maybe a couple of hours but then when the eye passed, the wind came from the other direction so whereas one side of the

hospital was being battered and the windows were coming in on that side and then as soon as the eye passed the other side of the hospital got it. We had to run over there and fix the other side of the hospital.

There was water in the corridors a couple inches deep just from the wind being blown in, and the water leaking through the roof. We were very concerned about the roof in that it was one of those flat roofs that had the tarpaper on the top, and then rocks had been put on the top, and of course, the hurricane picked up a lot of those rocks and threw them all over the place breaking windows. But the hospital didn't collapse; it maintained its integrity. We had heard that a hospital on the north area, one wall had collapsed there and a patient had died but we didn't have any patients that we lost because of loss of power. The nurses did a fantastic job ventilating those little premature infants with their Ambu bags and I think everybody did a really outstanding job in making sure the patients got through the storm safely. And then after the storm, President Edwards gave little cups, coffee cups, out to people who were here during the height, and it says, "Thank you for helping MUSC through the storm and keeping our patients safe." or something such as that.

Brooke Fox: Was there anytime when you were concerned, or you know, worried about your safety at all during the storm or you're just so focused on ...?

Dr. Othersen: You were focused on what you were doing. I mean it was something that you didn't have time to just sit around and think. But we never feared that the storm would blow the building down. It withstood those things; it didn't blow down. We thought the roof might go and skylight might go. The windows were going like crazy and we were worried about the generator the whole time because the maintenance people had run big extension cords from the Children's Hospital over to the adjacent MUSC because they didn't have electricity and we did have the emergency

generator going. Of course, we lost all the electric power, except for the generator, but we didn't have a big enough generator to supply the whole hospital but they moved some patients into the Children's Hospital so that they could be here with the ventilator. But we were never really worried that the hospital would blow down.

Brooke Fox: Okay, well that's good. So, after the storm passed and the next morning, everything kind of calmed down a bit outside? What do you remember?

Dr. Othersen: Well, it was very eerie when the eye passed over because the wind had really been howling like banshees and it was breaking windows and you could just hear--it was like a freight train outside. But then when the eye of the storm passed, it was eerily quiet--nothing.

Brooke Fox: How long did that last?

Dr. Othersen: About an hour I'm thinking.

Brooke Fox: About an hour? Okay.

Dr. Othersen: And then the wind came from the other direction and it was hitting the hospital again. But then after the entire storm passed over, that was about morning then, I remember thinking how quiet it was. You didn't hear anything because nobody had electricity and there weren't any people out with chainsaws yet.

Brooke Fox: No cars?

Dr. Othersen: No cars on the streets. So, I walked outside and saw all the tree limbs that were down. And saw there was a boat up on Lockwood Boulevard, a sailboat; it was sitting in the middle of the street. And the walls of Saint

Luke's Chapel had been completely demolished. Just a portion of the walls were standing. So, there was quite a bit of devastation and you realized that the city had been hit a hard blow and there were so many trees down. So many limbs down. Charleston is the sort of city where before Hugo you could go up on a high building, the highest ones around like the Francis Marion or whatever, and look out over the city and you would see green- because of the many trees in the city. But after Hugo, a lot of those trees were gone. So even to this day, all those trees haven't been restored.

I remember looking around at the hospital and being amazed that we were in as good a shape as we were. As I said, we didn't lose any patients and arrangements had been made to bring a big flat bed truck in with a big generator on it, which would then we're going to hook up to whole medical center. We realized that we had a lot of work to do to clean up but we felt very fortunate that we didn't have any fatalities due to the storm.

And then I went home to see what had gone on at home and I think that was one of the things that bothered people who were staying in the hospital the most is concern about what was happening to your house and your family at home. There was thought at that time that maybe, it be good to have families come in and stay with you but the facilities are not there for that sort of thing. So that was a concern but the street where I live a lot of trees had gone down, a lot of limbs down. And shortly after the hurricane, when people got their gas-powered chainsaws out and started cutting the limbs down. A drive down the street was sort of like driving through a wall of forest because there were limbs stacked up all along the sides of the street.

So it was quite a bit of devastation, in fact I remember hearing that it was, up until that time, the most costly natural disaster in the United States--the damage that it did. But of course a few, I think about a week or so after that, the earthquake in California--and you know the loss of one house in California would probably equal to what we lost here. So that soon surpassed us in monetary damages, but it took a long time for Charleston to recover from it. In fact, some places never recovered, some businesses never recovered, some homes didn't. We were very fortunate at our house, we had a window blown in and the roof lifted up a little bit but the roof didn't leak and we were very fortunate. The house next to us lost their entire slate roof and that roof had been put on in the 1700's. And to find slate to replace it, they had to go back to the original supplier of the slate from Wales, England in the 1700's. The company was still in existence and they supplied the slate. But it took a long time for recovery--in fact, the city is still recovering.

But it's like everything else, with the bad comes some good. And Charleston didn't suffer the recession of the '90s because there was too much construction going on and insurance money came in and you look at the beaches—Sullivan's Island, Isle of Palms—a lot of those houses, which were no more than shacks, were destroyed. Because in Charleston, before Hugo, a beach house was a beach house; it was just a simple place, where you could wear your bathing suit inside and not worry about it. But then that money which came from the insurance companies, was used to build some big houses over there so now it's a different place. The houses there are no longer beach houses but they're big houses. So there was some good to it, although there was a lot of bad to it also.

Brooke Fox:

The morning after the storm, were there a lot of people who were hurt, who came, started coming into the hospital? Did you have influx of injuries?

Dr. Othersen: Well, we were told and it turned out to be that way. A lot of people evacuated during Hugo. There wasn't the massive problems with evacuation that had subsequently occurred during Floyd, I think it was, when the interstates were bumper to bumper and it took seven hours to get to Summerville. And I think people were sort of shocked by what happened with Hugo and so they wanted to get out the next time.

I think the city did very well. Now, if the hurricane had hit just south of Charleston--it hit down in say, Edisto Beach, we would have been in a lot worse shape because McClellanville had fifteen-foot surge and that's where people had to stand on tables and hold their children over their heads as the water rose. But we didn't have that big storm surge.

It's interesting that Katrina, in New Orleans, was very similar to Hugo and the big difference happened when the levy broke in New Orleans. We didn't have a levy break. We didn't get the massive storm surge so if we had a fifteen-foot storm surge, it'd been a lot worse. We'd of lost our generator on the first floor without any question. But I think all in all, when I look back on it, I think the university hospital was well prepared, the response to the hurricane was well thought out and well executed. I think the nurses and the maintenance crew did an excellent job as did the physicians- there were a number of physicians who stayed as part of the essential team. And as I said, none of our patients died or were harmed as a result of the storm.

Brooke Fox: But did you get any patients coming from, or people coming from outside who were injured?

Dr. Othersen: Well after the storm, we had been told that we would be isolated because it's--particularly if we had a big storm surge. But that storm surge goes

out with the tide and we wouldn't have been--well of course New Orleans was different and that they're below sea, the levy broke and so they were isolated. They couldn't get in and out of the hospital so you don't get people coming in emergency room because they can't get to the hospital. And we were told that's probably what would happen and that was true. The only time we started seeing patients come to the emergency room, was when people started using chain saws and get hurt from that but we didn't see a lot of injuries from the storm itself. People couldn't get to the hospital.

Brooke Fox: Mm-hmm. What other damage do you recall on campus or other buildings besides Saint Luke's and the hospital--did you notice any other?

Dr. Othersen: Well, Saint Luke's was of course, the major one. It was just completely devastated and I think that's because it was an old building and the walls were not that thick. But looking at the rest of the hospital, I didn't see any structural defects. In other words there weren't any walls blown down, lots of windows were blown in, in the Children's Hospital particularly because of the constructions defect, the way they were installed but...

Brooke Fox: But the library or the basic science building? Nothing [unintelligible]?

Dr. Othersen: No, there were a lot of signs down and things like that but no big defects that I remember seeing. Nothing like a roof blown off or anything such as that. It looks like the university buildings stood up pretty well. I was impressed.

Brooke Fox: We have pictures on our collection of the National Guard, sitting out in the horseshoe area after the storm. Do you recall how long they were there...?

Dr. Othersen: Well, the National Guard was called to prevent looting. Particularly down on the stores in King Street because a lot of windows, show windows, were broken and people could go in and loot and there was a wide spread concern about looting after the storm and I know the police chief at the time was--what was his name? The guy who used to skate, roller skates, Rueben Greenberg. He was concerned about looting and he sent policemen and national guardsmen down King Street to watch out for looting but I don't think we had any problem with that. Yeah, I know our offices were pretty well devastated by the leaks. We had moved computers and we'd covered them up with plastic bags so our computers were not damaged but books in bookcases were saturated and we lost a number of books.

Brooke Fox: And your files, did you lose a lot of files too?

Dr. Othersen: Yeah the files, I think, was situated sort of inboard, not near windows, and they were okay. They were not damaged.

Brooke Fox: Yesterday I interviewed Dr. Gollad, and we talked about what happened in his department, the pharmacy building. And he had said that because of the storm surge that they got because of where the building on Calhoun Street was situated, that his desk, he could open it the first day after the storm but then eventually it swelled. Did you have any problems like that?

Dr. Othersen: Well, the pharmacy school was on Calhoun Street and that building is on the ground--just a couple of inches off the ground. Whereas the Children's Hospital has a foundation, there's a sort of subfloor underneath the bottom floor so that we were up higher. As I say, we got water coming in up to about six or eight feet on that first level but it didn't get up into any of the office areas or anything so I didn't have that

problem with water actually coming up into the... Now, we did have water blown in and leaked in through the roof but we didn't have any rising water. That's why I say, if the hurricane had hit below Charleston, we would have gotten that fifteen-foot surge but even then, that would have just gone up to the second floor, it wouldn't have gone up to the offices and the patient floors.

Brooke Fox: In subsequent months, did you end up, were there problems with mold; actually, it wouldn't have taken months it would have taken a few days for mold problems to appear...

Dr. Othersen: Mold is always a big problem here. Mold is big. And the university hospital, and the Children's Hospital, this area here at one time was marsh and it been filled in and there were--most of Charleston except for the high point along King and Meeting Street and a lot of it was filled with marsh and so it doesn't take a lot to saturate it and to make it moldy. And so we'd had a big problem with mold under the Children's Hospital and that was accentuated after the Hurricane Hugo and I think they eventually had to pave under the hospital, put concrete down to get rid of the mold. And the mold can be dangerous and if it gets in to the air handling systems and distributed it around the hospital.

Brooke Fox: Were you involved in any hands-on cleanup of debris or anything, the glass in your office...?

Dr. Othersen: Oh, we were. Our offices were in shambles from all the water that had been all blown in and leaked in and we'd spent weeks cleaning that up. And of course at home, we lived a block west of King Street and that's pretty high ground for Charleston. But our back garden, if we walked into the back garden, right after the storm, there was about two feet of water in the back and big limbs were down and one tree was uprooted so there was

lot of damage to the property at home too. And of course, walking around the university there was just debris and tree limbs all over the place.

So it was a lot of work to do for a lot of people and I really felt sorry for the people who had roof damage. It rained a lot right after the storm passed and if the roof was damaged, and then it rained and rain poured in, it would ruin the plaster walls and the walls started caving in. And then there were a bunch of people who come through and said that they were roof repairmen and they weren't anything--they were just people living out of their cars and trying to make a quick buck and move on. But yeah, it was a long time cleaning up. University took a long time to get cleaned up but I was proud of the university, I thought that the medical university did a good job of preparing for, meeting, and cleaning up after the hurricane.

Brooke Fox: Okay do you have any final thoughts or stories about the storm?

Dr. Othersen: You know you always look for the silver lining--the things that are good. And the hurricane was good in some ways in that, now I've already mentioned that Charleston with the infusion of insurance money didn't undergo that recession in the '90s. A lot of houses were badly in need of repair or renovation but the owners couldn't afford it. Then with insurance money, to fix damage induced by the hurricane, they also were able to fix up their houses so that Charleston looked better following the repairs after Hugo. And also it made people think of other people too. I remember just before the television stations went off the air, one of the commentators was saying "you know that guy next door, that you just waved to when you go to work, or when you come home. You're going to get to know him better." And I think that was very true that you were concerned about your neighbors. We had purchased a small generator and it was enough to run a refrigerator and a few other things and I remember passing an

extension cord over to my neighbors too to let them use it for a while. And I also had gas water heater and a gas range top so we could cook and we could have hot water. We didn't have electricity but we had a generator that we could run our refrigerator. It wasn't a big enough generator to run a whole lot of things. The freezer had a bunch of shrimp in the freezer side—I had been shrimping the year before down in Edisto. And I had a bunch of shrimp frozen so I just took them all out and we cooked them and invited all the neighbors. Anyway, we had a big shrimp feast. So you did get to know your neighbors; you were concerned about them. You tried to find out how you could help them afterwards so there was some good to Hugo.

Brooke Fox: Did that kind of atmosphere of community and helping each other happen on campus too?

Dr. Othersen: Oh, yeah. Yes, yes. There's always how can you help the other person? How can you all work together and get this done? And it does foster a different attitude and one of not caring about what other people do. So there was good to Hugo. I thought it was Shakespeare who said "it's an ill wind that blows no one any good" but I think it's somebody else. But anyway, there was some good to this ill wind.

Brooke Fox: Okay. Well, if that's all?

Dr. Othersen: That's it.

Brooke Fox: Thank you very much.

Dr. Othersen: Thank you.

End of recording.