

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

and

TUCKER WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

NARRATOR: DEBORAH JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: Volker Janssen

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PROJECT: 2007 SANTIAGO FIRE

VJ: Um, then let me start this. It's May 31, 2008, at 9:25 in the morning. My name's Volker Janssen. I'm a history professor at Cal State, Fullerton, and I'm interviewing today Deborah Johnson, President of the Inter-Canyon League, for the Oral History Project of the Tucker Wildlife Sanctuary. Uh, Deborah, I'd like to start, um, with your life history before we get to, uh, the dramatic events of October 2007 and the details of your work with the Inter-Canyon League. Where and when were you born?

DJ: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1952.

VJ: Um, it doesn't sound like the same natural environment that you now find yourself in. Tell me a little bit about your childhood and your experience with nature as a child.

DJ: It was rather limited. I grew up in Gary, Indiana—um, my parents moved there when I was a year old—which is a steel town right on Lake Michigan. My experience of nature was pretty much limited to the summer at the beach along Lake Michigan, and then occasional excursions into parks around the area. And there actually were large city parks that we would go sledding in, and things like that.

Um, but then what happened, which in terms of experience with nature, we lived in the inner city area, and it was during the sixties when there was a lot of racial turbulence. And our house got robbed, and my parents decided to move out to the suburbs, the typical white flight. And, um, we drove around, all around Lake Michigan, looking for a place for like seven months. And they finally bought a lot, and it was on a sand dune in a very natural area. It was a guarded community.

And, uh, they built a house. And I think that, in terms of my coming to live in the canyon, that was kind of a pivotal experience because looking for a place surrounded by nature, that house was totally surrounded by trees and wildlife, and very beautiful. I felt—actually, I never felt too comfortable in the *house* because it was a real upper-class community, but I was very comfortable in the environment, living right close to the beach, and things like that. So—

VJ: And what did your father do?

DJ: My father ran the hospital, the largest hospital in the city.

VJ: So that was a big commute for him, then.

DJ: Yes. Yes. Then my parents wound up getting divorced, and Mother wound up selling the house, and things like that. But they moved when I was seventeen, so I was just going to college, and I went to Swarthmore outside Philadelphia, which has gorgeous grounds. They have a botanical society that maintains them, and it was quite lovely.

VJ: Your mother was a homemaker, then?

DJ: Yes. She had run a lab in the hospital, and then she quit working. She had four children and quit working. And then after they divorced, she went back to work.

VJ: So you went to college at Swarthmore. Tell me a little bit about that, your college life.

DJ: Um (chuckles) my college life. It was a very difficult experience for me. I, um, Swarthmore is an extremely difficult univ—uh, college, and, um, it's not that academically it was difficult, but it was difficult for me, um, leaving home and being on my own like that. There were some other things that occurred that were rather difficult for me. I was very, um—I studied a lot. I spent a lot of time alone. I did have friends, but most of my time was spent actually running, and, um, then studying.

Then from there I went—I went—I was going to go to law school, but I left after three weeks, and instead I went out to Washington, D.C., and worked for the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee for three months. Then I went back to Northwestern and got a master's degree in journalism and broadcast journalism. And then I went to Virginia and worked for a national cable company, writing and producing television shows and news. And then I went—I came out to California and started working as a freelance writer doing fundraising shows for relief and development organizations, specifically World Vision.

VJ: So all these assignments then usually focused your life on urban centers.

DJ: No.

VJ: No?

DJ: Oh, no, no, no. My work for the relief and development agencies was all done in the poorest areas of the world, all over the world, villages primarily.

VJ: So you really traveled a lot then.

DJ: I've traveled all over the world for about twenty-five years constantly. I do a lot of work in Africa. I'm going to Nairobi in a couple of weeks. Over the past five years I've spent about a third of my time in Nairobi. Um, I'm working on opening up projects in Angola and El Salvador. I just started my own nonprofit, and it is to help children in urban slum areas, but I've worked with the poor in developing countries for many, many years.

VJ: Wow. Um, what are the—how has this worked sort of—what are the most important ways in which the work has shaped you personally?

DJ: I think I've shaped my work more than my work has shaped me. I've always been extremely concerned about the poor, and about global issues, um, from the time that I was a child. And, um, I think that what has changed me has been seeing the people that I've seen in the state of constant crisis. I was in Banda Aceh right after the tsunami, and I was on the first private relief flight flown into Afghanistan. I was at Katrina. I—probably the first big thing was the big famine in Ethiopia in the mid-eighties. I wrote a lot of the biggest TV shows on that. And the scenes—it was absolutely just, uh, it was a devastating experience but a really significant one just because of the numbers. I was mobbed by starving people, and the guards had to come and beat them off me. And, um, it was just, uh—and then I've been in civil wars (chuckles) all over the world. I've had guns pulled on me. I mean, I've—I've had quite an interesting life. (chuckles)

VJ: So you really—you really are familiar with—with disaster and crisis.

DJ: Yes.

VJ: Um, on a large scale.

DJ: Yes, which really shaped the experience here in the canyon. The other thing that I haven't mentioned—I moved to the canyon in '87. Um, I had come out to California in '84, and I was living in Sierra Madre, and, um, they upped the rent and I decided this was silly. I needed to find a place to live. And I—I remembered the classified ads. Silverado was the only place that had a house under \$100,000, and I'd seen it in the ads for months, and finally I just decided to drive down here. And just—it was exactly what I wanted. I'd been looking in canyons in Glendale, out by Claremont, and then I came down here and it was just what I was looking for. I wanted a place that had a lot of trees and a lot of nature, but that was still close enough so that I could go to Hollywood, you know, do things for work, and stuff like that.

Oh, but then—wait. But then—so I bought the house in '87, then I left for four and a half years, and I went to Stanford and got a Ph.D. in communications. So I was gone for four and a half years.

VJ: So the main reason you found yourself in the canyon was because of price?

DJ: Price and the natural beauty, yes. Once I had identified the canyon—I found this house that I'm living in right now on my first trip down here. She showed me like four houses, and this was a *total* disaster. The walls were purple and blue. There was a wasp nest in the kitchen. There was—the furnace wasn't hooked up. It was—they had started a remodel and then stopped in the middle, and then rented it out. (laughs) And, uh—but it was—but I really liked the rock walls, and I liked the setting, and I have a large yard, which most houses out here don't have. I just really liked it, from the first time I came down here, and just decided immediately to buy it.

VJ: Were you generally open to living in suburbs, um—

DJ: No.

VJ: No.

DJ: You mean like an Irvine Company tract? No. *Absolutely not*. No. I would have kept looking. I mean, I was even looking at properties that had no electricity (chuckles) or heat. I mean, I was—no. I drove all the way—I drove up the 5 [Freeway 5] to this little community in the mountains. No. I wanted to live in a place where I had things to look at. I—I didn't want to live in a city area, at all.

VJ: If you had to compare, you know, the quality of life, you know, of the suburb with this place—and you made that decision at that time, I'm sure, in part because of that awareness of what the quality of life differences are. Um, what makes the suburbs so unacceptable for you?

DJ: I need color. Suburbs are fairly beige. Um, I—one of the things about living here—this isn't necessarily a negative on the suburbs—is you absolutely never know what you are going to see. I can be sitting in my house and look out the window and see a row of cars from the 1920s, like forty of them just drive by on a weekend. With the people dressed up in old-fashioned clothes. Or you can be—all of a sudden you'll see someone walking a cow down the street. Or someone with a couple of goats on a leash. It's, um—life out here is *filled* with the unexpected. And I think that in suburban areas you don't have that as much, and that's one of the most pleasurable parts about living—now, there's other unexpected things, too, like fires and mudslides, you know, which make it quite difficult. But just in terms of the overall quality of life.

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Then the other thing about living here—but I've lived here a long time, and I would like to think this would also be true if I was living in the suburbs—is that we all know each other. But I didn't know people until I started working with the Inter-Canyon League and became involved in the civic affairs out here. I—I knew the people at the post office and at the library, and they were very important to me. Like when I was applying for my Ph.D. to graduate schools, the postmistress was so encouraging. You know, I mean, she just gave me so much support and—and it meant so much to me, because we have to go in there every day and get our mail, you know.

VJ: Did you move here alone?

DJ: Yes. I've always lived alone.

VJ: Um, you said that you really only became part of the community when you started working with the Inter-Canyon League.

DJ: Mm-hmm.

VJ: What was it like before? Did people treat you like an outsider?

DJ: No. I just—I occasionally went to some of the—we have country fairs and things here, and I occasionally went to some of those. I would buy a Christmas tree from the school, because they used to sell them. I knew my neighbors, but not very well, but I knew them enough. And then—so it was—I was very—I was traveling a lot. I was gone a lot. And I just—would just close up the house and just leave. And the real estate agent helped me. She, um—so I had like two or three people, but that was it. I didn't feel funny. It was fine with me. And I was also very close to my neighbor, that's true. Carolyn lived next door, and I spent a lot of time with her.

VJ: Now, there must have been a striking contrast, the kind of work you do, and then, you know, moving to Stanford for the Ph.D., traveling the world, seeing a range of crises in areas, people in desperate need, and then coming to these—to this refuge, this oasis.

DJ: And the reason why I got involved with the Inter-Canyon League was because I realized—and I also—I knew that—I'm an extremely introverted person, um, although I've developed a lot of social skills, and traveling the world and being in all these areas and trying to help people, and then realizing I wasn't doing anything, anything at all, for my own community. That's why I got involved with the Inter-Canyon League, because I decided that it was time to start helping take care of where I was. And I didn't even know that much about the issues. I—I went to my first meeting because I wanted the power lines buried out here, which never happened.

Um, and then—but, you know, I think the reason why I got involved was Judy Myers, who was a long-time resident out here, and she was always very kind to me.

So there were like five or six people in the canyon who I didn't know very well but were just exceptionally kind to me, and that meant a great deal to me. And Judy's always encouraging people, so she would say, "You know, Debbie, come to our meetings, come to our meetings." I said, "Oh, no." But then, you know, finally *I did*. It took like maybe three years, I don't know, but I finally did. And then once I did, and I made that commitment to the community, then a lot of stuff happened. (laughs)

VJ: Um, so you said you first got there to—to basically get your power lines put underground.

DJ: Mm-hmm.

VJ: Um, and the reaction to that was probably—

DJ: Silence. (laughs) It's a really big undertaking, and there were only three people in the room. When I went to the first meeting of the Inter-Canyon League, there were just three people there, but I don't even remember exactly who it was. Judy and Bob and—I think a guy named Tony. And, um, and they were very nice, but they had no idea what to do. (laughs) So that was it. I don't really remember when I went back after I had made the commitment to really help the community, but when I got involved with the Inter-Canyon League, I think they had maybe \$50 in their budget, and they weren't doing anything. They were meeting on Sunday afternoons, and there was really very little going on.

VJ: When did that change?

DJ: As soon as I got involved. (laughs) I started getting grants. We started getting fire-safe grants. Um—

VJ: What—do you recall the moment you said, Okay, I'm going to really invest effort here?

DJ: No, but I remember the personal decision I made to make a commitment to my own community. I don't remember the moment, like when I was in the meeting with a bunch of them, but I became—they elected me the president like almost immediately. And my—I write a lot of grants and get a lot of projects funded, so my first—one of my first priorities was to try to get some money for the organization, since they had basically none. And, um, so—and then—and there were a group of like five or six of us—I don't remember the whole sequence, especially now, after the fire and all the incredible things that happened. I don't—it was just like eight years ago. But there was a small group of people, and we just started doing more work, getting more organized.

What I do is, I'm—I know how to get things done, and I know how to help people get things done. And a lot of times, when you're trying to figure out what to do in a community, it's difficult, because you don't know really who to contact, or things

like that. So in working with the Inter-Canyon League, I was able to help facilitate that process.

And one of the biggest things we had to do when I got involved with the Inter-Canyon League—uh, for many, many years the politicians and the people in the country stayed away from the canyon because they just thought we were a bunch of hotheads and a bunch of rednecks. And—so we had no established relationships with any of the political groups in Orange County, and the community didn't understand that that was quite detrimental to us. They saw that as preserving their independence, and they didn't realize that the world was changing, and that as a result of our unwillingness to work with these people, we were losing services.

Now that we're talking, I remember, that was one of my primary things in those early years was to get people to understand that, if we could be respected as representing the canyons and become a voice for the canyons within the county and other groups within the community, we could improve the quality of life out here. And I don't mean in a city way, but I just mean we were getting screwed, um, on a lot of different things that, um—for example, our garbage rates and service and things. There were just a lot of small issues that needed to be addressed, and so once I got involved and could start identifying those and we could start working through them, I don't know, it just started growing.

VJ: So I guess your—your professional skills and your background really made it possible for you to be the liaison.

DJ: Yes.

VJ: Um, for the canyon. Um, did your relationship to the community then also change as a result?

DJ: Yes.

VJ: I mean, people must have looked at you in a very different way once they saw, oh, this woman that, you know, once in a while appeared here and often is really gone really is turning things around.

DJ: Yes. Yes. There was a tremendous amount of—and it wasn't just me. I have to say that. I mean, I do a lot of thinking and strategizing, and I don't do a lot of the hands-on things. I don't organize the large events. I didn't even go to them for a long time, and then I realized it's probably better if I start going to them. And, um, and people started knowing who I was and—the Inter-Canyon League also has attracted a lot of criticism, exactly for what I was talking about in terms of collaborating and working with other groups in the county. There's been resistance to that among certain people, so I also attracted a lot of criticism.

And it's been tremendous for me, personally and professionally, because through my work in the canyon, um, I have learned how to deal with difficult personalities.

(laughs) And anyone watching this from the canyon will understand *exactly* what I'm talking about. It has been quite a challenge. This community is filled with so many unusual people and characters. And we are living close together. And we have to work together because we're not like, say, an apartment building, where services are provided. We are a voice in negotiating all of these things, and, um, um, it's just been, um—you have your factions, and you have your characters, and you have your critics, and you just ride through.

VJ: You said people from the canyon would know what you're talking about.

DJ: Yes.

VJ: Those of us who are not from the canyon, can you give us some clues? You don't have to name any names, but maybe, uh, you know, focus on a couple of issues where you felt, Wow, this is—uh, these people can be difficult.

DJ: Well, the most recent—the one that comes to mind first is, of course, the most recent one, which is jumping a little bit ahead to the fire, but we got a gift of a million dollars to be distributed to the fire victims, and there's been rumblings within the community, like, Oh, they're not spending it, they're keeping it, they're stealing it. I mean, nothing could be further from the truth. And, so, in response to that, rather than just ignoring it, I wrote up a—a summary of what was distributed so far and it was published in the community paper. For a while, I was doing a community paper. It came out—well, when I had the time, which was every like two to three months. I did that for like four years, um—

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But, anyway, so I—so the summary—so I published a summary of all the—and that's the thing that I found is, for all the grumblings of people, if you just give them—present them with information and they could see it, they're fine. But what happens, if you're not straightforward and you're not clear and you're not forthcoming with information, that's when the grumbling and the dissent starts. And people actually have been pretty reasonable, and as soon as you present the information, most people just, you know, move along.

We have a history here, you know. I've been here for twenty years. There's a lot of other people who have lived here for more than ten years. We know each other. We've seen each other go in and out of groups, in and out of different activities, in and out of relationships. And, um—so it's different when you live in a community where you know the layers of history, and, um, it gives, I think, the community a sense of greater value to you, because everything is contextualized and related.

VJ: What other point of disagreement has the community had that you were—that you were—where you were part of it, where you felt that you were dealing with characters?

DJ: Well, I'm also on the Park Board, and the Park Board runs the Children's Center. And, um, the Children's Center was in the red for many, many years, and the Park Board was having to give the Children's Center money. It was a huge problem for the Park Board. And we finally decided to terminate the Center director, who had been there for a long time, and the community got totally up in arms. That was actually very terrible. We had a meeting one night when the community came to protest our decision to let her go. And the room was packed, and the people said very painful things to us on the board. And we were trying to be responsible with the tax dollars. I—I had designed children's centers, and, um, I had worked with them throughout L.A. and Long Beach, and I knew that what was going on there wasn't right. And if you looked at the finances, we couldn't get clear answers on what was happening. We couldn't—and it was just a mess.

And, um, within that group of, I don't know, maybe seventy people screaming at us—and people even brought their children to yell at us and tell us that we were—what we were doing was really bad. But they also personalized it and said things about us, you know. And, um—and that was really—I actually felt like I was getting physically beat up, but you couldn't say anything, and you couldn't show anything on your face. And, of course, I left the next day like to go to Africa, or something like that, and, um—and there were people in that group who were supportive of us, but they didn't say anything. And, um—so that was very difficult when we terminated the director of the Children's Center.

VJ: You said the next day after this particular occasion you traveled to Africa and you visited a community with a whole different range of problems.

DJ: Yeah.

VJ: Um, that go far deeper and far closer to the core of survival, really.

DJ: Yes.

VJ: Um, was there—and even though the contrast seems to be so striking, there must have been many points where you thought, really, communities all over the world have certain things in common.

DJ: Yes.

VJ: Apart from the fact that people—that communities have characters—

DJ: Yes.

VJ: And, um, and have conflict within them. There must have been other things that you felt communities have in common.

DJ: Well, in the work that I've done in Africa, especially in Nairobi, since that's where I've spent most of my time—I've been to many of the other places but haven't

worked there over a period of years. Um, I do a lot of work in Kibera, which is one of the biggest slums in the world. Um, and you—when you're an outsider like I am coming in, it takes a while for you to find out what's going on underneath the surface, and to realize how, um, all the political struggles going on. But over there, it's—I mean, they kill each other (laughs), you know. They put tires around people's necks and put them on fire. So it's, uh, different—the stakes are different.

You *have* the personality issues, and that's what working in the canyon was so valuable to me in terms of learning about how to deal with different personalities and issues. And over there, there are personality issues, but there's also those very core survival issues. And most of the time, the projects I've been involved in have been dealing with those core survival issues.

But, not just through my work in the canyon, but my other work in the States. I've done a lot of research in low-income communities. I've done a lot of surveys, thousands of surveys with non-English speaking low-income people in my work for the school districts. And I just—I realize whatever people say about cultural differences, and I value cultural differences, but everybody wants the same thing. People want their kids to be healthy. People want their kids to grow up.

And a lot of times, you know, we forget—and I'm not talking about the canyons here, I'm talking about my other work—we lay on this—this superficial thing, projecting what these people want. And we think that they're different than we are, or something like that, and they're not. I mean, my—my research has *conclusively* shown that parents want what's best for their kids. Do they know how to do it? No, you know. And we can help with that, you know.

But, um, but it's a different—it's a different thing. You do have—and they—I mean, they kill each other over there. Like, when Nairobi erupted I was talking to my friends on cell phones while gunfire was going out all around them. And, um, um—so it's different. It's a survival thing.

Actually, here, before I became involved with the Inter-Canyon League, um, what I was doing before, I was a hospice volunteer, so I spent five years working with people who were dying, as a volunteer. And, um, and that's much more like my work over in Africa, because you're dealing with very core, very fundamental issues. And here, it wasn't that. It almost became that during the fire and—so now we're not dealing with the core issues but with a level of issues right above that.

VJ: Mm-hmm. Um, at what point in your involvement with the Inter-Canyon League did you start to think about, um, fire safety, disaster prevention—

DJ: From the beginning.

VJ: From the beginning?

DJ: Yeah. The first grants we got were for fire safety and setting up the Fire Safe Council. And Mary Schreiber who lives out here, that was really her passion. And one of the things that I did as the head of the Inter-Canyon League is to encourage people who have passion and who want to benefit the community. That's how we've gotten everything done. And, um, so I helped write the grant, that first grant. And we got it. But then I did things like figure out how to structure it, you know, hiring a grant administrator, the kinds of activities that we should be doing. I think we got, I don't know, it was between thirty-five and fifty thousand dollars.

And then the first year of that, we had a consulting company come in and do a plan, which people in the canyon probably—it was sent to everybody in the canyon, but who knows if they even read it? But it had evacuation plans, it had fire—a lot of really good fire safety information, it identified areas of particular hazard within the county—I mean, within the canyon.

And—so, I mean—and then we—another thing that happened, the county used to do brush clearance out here, and—that was actually—before I got involved with the Inter-Canyon League, that was the one event that everybody got involved in, because the trucks would go up and down the road and you would just put your brush out on the road and they'd pick it up and take it off someplace. And it was a big deal here. Once a year they would do that. We expanded that. We had that, but then we started these Chipper Days and all these other things, so—people outside the community don't realize that we have been heavily involved in fire prevention for about six years.

And one of the—one of the—aside from clearing out the brush, um, one of the most positive things that developed as a result of that was the relationship that Mary developed with the Orange County Fire Authority, which was really helpful during the fire. And they also, because of our Fire Safe Council, the emergency plans that we've done—because we've been meeting every month about fire safety for like five or six years out here. And we've had demonstrations on barricades, things to protect houses, and—we've done a huge amount. We're actually one of the model fire safe councils in the state.

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But the other thing that happened, um, she developed a relationship with the—with the Fire Authority—getting back to—the other thing that happened, when I was talking about how when I took over the Inter-Canyon League, I thought it was important for the canyon to develop a recognized voice in governmental bodies, and things like that, that made decisions about our well being. So, we really built up a good relationship with the county supervisor's office, Bill Campbell, and during the whole fire, I was talking to his office saying, "We need this, we need that," you know. So between those two things, our relationships with the Fire Authority and our relationships with the supervisor's office, these are things that

have been developed over like five years, and that made a huge difference when the fire actually happened.

VJ: Mm-hmm. There must have been a lot that you learned about fire, about the canyon—

DJ: Yes.

VJ: —about the nature here that, coming from Michigan and Indiana, you didn't necessarily know. Um, can you recall—can you recall sort of the learning process of like finding out things about this canyon that were absolutely new to you?

DJ: Yes. Going to those Fire Safe Council meetings and—and, I mean, even learning about defensible space. When you buy a house out here, you don't get any information. If you build a house, yes, you get a ton of it. But if you buy a house, you don't get any information about fire safety or anything out here. And, um, just learning about things—those Fire Safe Council meetings are actually interesting. Mary always tries to add some sort of an education component. Like your eaves should be like protected, or not open, like mine are open. And I've asked people about it, and then they say it's not really worth it to, you know, close them all up.

And then, you know, like, um, with the vegetation. I have two big pine trees in my backyard, and pine trees are like horrible, they're like torches, you know. But then I just learned at a meeting a few weeks ago that, well, it really depends upon the condition of the pine tree. If there's a lot of moisture in it and things like that, it's not nearly as much of a hazard as if it's all brown.

So that's another thing with the information, you know. You can't just take the information at face value. You sometimes have to look a little bit beneath it and see what is it really saying.

VJ: Um, so you started to try to educate people also about the need for fire safety.

DJ: Yes.

VJ: Um, would you say that overall the community is responsive and does what's necessary to keep their properties fire safe?

DJ: Yes. I was actually very surprised. Um, when I started going to the Fire Safe Council meetings, and the officers of the ICL are—the Fire Safe Council's part of the ICL—and I was surprised at how many people in the canyon were coming to the meetings and were seriously interested, and all of that. And then the other issue is that there are some people in the canyons who like— just are going to have major problems if they ever have a fire start in their house, or something like that. And we know that, and we would talk about that a little bit. But, yes, in general, yes. The community has been a big supporter of fire prevention efforts for the past five years.

VJ: Of course, some of the fire prevention measures can—can be in conflict with lifestyle preferences that come with living out here.

DJ: Yes.

VJ: In the canyon. Can you talk about that a little?

DJ: That hasn't been as much of—

VJ: I mean, there's some compromises that people have to make.

DJ: That hasn't been as much of an issue as it's going to become now, but this gets back to the whole question about the—the urban-wildland interface, and people choosing to live in a place like this. And there's rumblings among the media and things like that, you know, that imply like, oh, we're so dumb that we choose to live in this type of an environment. Well, the reality is, is that these homes have been here since the 1860s, and that communities like this have a lot to contribute. We've had, um, bee industries in all the hills around us. There's been cattle, there's been the horses, the silver mines. I mean, there are reasons that people live here aside from just the natural beauty. And, um, and as a society, I mean, there *are* issues, but how can you tell people where they can live and where they can't live? And especially in the communities that have been here, you know, such a long time.

And what the issue right now is that they're writing these—these codes, these fire prevention codes. It's the same thing as they do like with the building codes. You're supposed to have all these spaces around your houses. It's not possible here. We don't have these big lots. We have these very small houses. Some of them don't have the setbacks that they're supposed to have. There was a lot of work done out here without permits, but a lot of places were built before there even *were* permits, you know. So it's a confusing issue, and it's something that actually I'm working on right now.

VJ: And then, of course, the other issue is, um, that you yourself might keep your place fire safe, but your neighbor may not, and puts your house in danger in the process.

DJ: But isn't the person's right to handle their own property as they see fit paramount over—in a situation like that? I mean, I would think so. So it's—so that's getting back to more fundamental issues of democracy and what people's rights are, and things like that. And there are strategies that you can use. Um, there's negotiation types of things. I mean, studies show that one of the most difficult relationships *can* be between two neighbors over things like boundary lines or fences, or whatever. But they also show that the best way to deal with them are for the neighbors to talk to each other and—

So there's ways. That's the kind of thing that the Inter-Canyon League and the community can do. Like I can call someone and say, Well, don't you think maybe you could talk to such—and we have done that. When there have been people who

have had like *big* vegetation things close to their house, you know, we have like had someone say to the person, well, you know, what about this, or what about that. So, I mean, we do things like that. And that's one of the beauties of knowing people in the community and working in a long-standing community is you can work through those informal channels and sometimes get a lot more done.

VJ: Mm-hmm. Now, you said you've lived here for twenty years. Um, fires and mudslides are nothing new in this natural environment, but do you think that, um, in Southern California, or Orange County, where generally things seems to have—seem to have gotten worse in the last fifteen, ten years?

DJ: I'm working on climate change projects right now for World Vision, so I'm looking at disasters all over the world, and (pauses)—I mean, I know that there's climate change. I'm working on all these carbon credit projects and things like that. I don't know if they've gotten worse or not. I think our fire fighting capability has gotten a lot better. I've seen that since I've lived here. I think that the Fire Authority knows more about these types of fires, and they're dealing with them. Although I think that their initial response to this one was not—it just wasn't good. But, um—and they will admit that themselves.

Um, so I don't know if it's getting—I don't think it's getting worse. Like, there was a girl killed by a rock falling down a few years ago, and that's at a store where there's been big rocks falling down, you know, for the past seventy years. They just fall down like once every fifteen years. So it's hard to look at—you know, when you're living in something in an everyday thing, it's harder to look at it from a larger time span because the earth doesn't function—I mean, it does function on a day-to-day level, but a lot of these types of events are a much bigger time span than our puny little one.

VJ: What are your thoughts about the encroaching developments from the south and the north and the Santiago Canyon? Does that affect, um, the canyon community at all?

DJ: Yes. And I think it's really sad. One of the things that we're trying to do is we're trying to have Santiago, the road going through this area, designated a scenic highway. And we've just started working with the county to preserve it and make sure that it maintains its natural beauty. What we really are upset about are the houses—and we've talked to the Irvine Company about this—destroying the view coming into the canyon area and going up to the ridgeline on those red rocks at the entrance to the canyon. And they've made some compromises, like not having lights up there and having houses at a certain level. I don't know exactly what the details were in all of that. But the whole thing just makes us sad.

VJ: Is this mostly an issue of scenery and—and the beauty of the landscape, or are there other sort of more—

DJ: Well, there's other things—

VJ: —practical issues—

DJ: There's other things, too. Like they want to close down our school and have all the kids go to the school in the new development and—they want to close down the school anyway. That's become a big issue. There's the issue of whether we'll keep our post office, whether we'll keep our library. These are all issues that are fundamental to community identity. And with twelve hundred houses, or whatever it is, going in right down the road, there is the chance that these fundamental institutions with our community will just get shut down and services provided there, and people can say, Oh, they can just go there. Yes, we're very concerned about that as well.

VJ: Um, I think maybe at this point we want to start talking about, um, the fire, uh, of last year.

DJ: Okay.

VJ: Um, and I'll leave that up to you however—whichever way you want to start, what was the beg—you know, how you first got—became part of the events, uh, of October 2007. Um, if you want to start about how you first heard about the fire and—

[0:40:03]

DJ: Phil McWilliams called me.

VJ: Phil McWilliams called you.

DJ: I was, uh—I had heard about fires earlier that day, and, um—and was watching. And then Phil called about, I don't know, it must have been four something or—in the afternoon, and said, "I heard there's a fire near there." And I said, "No, it's over at such and such," because I was watching the fires on the other thing, and I said, "No, it's over at such and such." He says—well, anyway—so I wound up getting in the car and going down, and yes, there was a fire right there at the mouth of the canyon, and the wind was whipping. And all that evening I kept going down there, and I—I had such a bad feeling, and I just stood there looking at it and thinking, I have such a bad feeling about this.

And *everyone, everyone* down there was saying, The canyon won't burn. The canyon won't burn. The wind's going in the other direction. And I'm thinking, It's the wind. It can change any time it wants (laughs), you know. And, um, I just really had a really bad feeling.

Then I went to the—I came home, and then I was down at seven o'clock the next morning, which you won't understand how unusual that is for me, because I'm not

usually up until ten. And, um, and then—oh, the bad thing about that night going down there was that there were no firefighters. There were these—these towering flames. They were on the other side of the ridge, across the street, and there were no firefighters the whole evening. And, um, I know now where they were, but then I didn't.

VJ: Where were they?

DJ: Um, the fire was encroaching on Jamboree Road. They were all down there at Jamboree Road, and nobody was putting out the fire that was coming towards the canyon, because down there it was—you know, that's where their headquarters is and houses, a lot more houses. And, um—so, then I was up at seven the next morning, and the fire had crossed the ridge. There were a group of us, like thirty of us, that kept going down there and looking. And then—so the fire crossed the ridge, and then it was jumping sort of all over. There were two firefighters fighting it down by the school.

And then all—it's so nerve wracking. I have—we have a—we set up a communication system here, so we have little radios that we can listen to our people talking about the emergency things. So I had the radios on, and I had the computer set to all these different—checking all these sites, I had the TV on. And all day long, it's like, Well, what am I going to do? What am I going to do? And finally—and I was on the phone. I kept going down there, and I heard—I knew it jumped.

And, um—now, we had been working on emergency things, but we had not gotten it right yet. Phil had been working on an emergency communication system over the computer, but he didn't have any backup, and every time we had some kind of an incident out here, he was never home. (chuckles) So the messages never went out. And the Water District was supposed to have an emergency number set up for us, because people used to call—we used to have our own water district, and people would call there for emergency information. And then Irvine Ranch Water, or whatever it is, took over—IRWD [Irvine Ranch Water District]—and they were supposed to have an emergency line for us. It was never updated. We were supposed to update it. And we had made arrangements for people to, but they never did. So our whole emergency communication thing really didn't work. And, actually, when this started Phil was out of the canyon as well.

And, um—so, um—but I still was listening to the media, and finally the power went out at 3:30. And, I had already packed up my computers, which were the most important thing to me. And, um—this is so funny. And I was on—I have—there's other women out here who live by themselves, and I was on the phone with them a lot, you know, seeing if they were going to stay or go. The big question was are we going to stay or go. And not just single women, but other people, too.

So finally, when the power went out, I thought, I'm not going to stay here with no power, and there's a fire at the mouth of the canyon, and I don't know if it's going to—if I had been able to know, it would have been fine, but at the last minute, I grabbed a handful of clothes and threw them in a trash bag and threw them in the car. And then I just left. And it was a funny feeling leaving, because everybody else had like their cars half packed, but everybody was kind of trying to decide whether to go or not.

And when I left I called Fran Williams, who is the treasurer of the Inter-Canyon League, and Judy Myers, and I told both of them to get out, you know. And I told Fran she could come stay with my mother. My mother has an apartment in Orange. And, um, so—anyway, so I left, and it was becoming pretty messy when I left. And, um, but it wasn't nearly as bad, of course, as it got.

And then I went to my mother's, and then I went out to dinner with a friend, just kind of glad to forget about this, because that living under that—listening to the radio, the TV, trying to figure out what's going on, it's *very* stressful. And on the way out there I heard that they'd ordered a volun—to the restaurant—I heard that they'd ordered a voluntary evacuation.

And then I came back, and it was like 10:30, and the first thing I did when I got there was to say to Mom, "Has Fran called?" And Mom said, "No." And I tried to call her, I tried to call Judy. Nobody was picking up. So I went to bed. And at midnight Mother came into my room waving the phone and said, you know, "Phone call." Well, Fran had tried to leave at 8:30, and that was right when the flames were coming down to the road.

VJ: That was Tuesday?

DJ: No, it was Monday.

VJ: Monday?

DJ: Yeah. And so they kept a bunch of people in a line for four hours, so she couldn't get out until like midnight, and then they had to drive through almost like all these flames. So there she was, with her cat, the library cat, the two cats who didn't get along. Came up to Mother's. Now, *all* of us thought this would just be maybe two days, okay? We didn't have a clue as to what lay ahead of us. And—so she plopped down on the couch. I took the library cat, and the cat kept me awake all night. (laughs)

And then the next morning—I don't even remember how we found out about Albertson's. Um, I think I was on the phone with somebody, and I think somebody told me that Gene was at Roberts—at—

VJ: You mean the camp of canyon residents.

DJ: It wasn't a camp. It was Gene and his truck at that point. And someone told me that Gene was down there. Well, I had a lot of work to do, so I told Fran to go down there and see what was going on, so she went down there. And then that afternoon she came back and said all these people were showing up down there.

And so—then I went down that afternoon—now, this is—this was one, um, this was one of those key moments like you're looking for, you know. I went down there. There was Gene in his truck on the radio, with people who stayed in the canyon deliberately so they could tell us what was going on and help, and they didn't want to leave their houses. And all the—and then Mary was running back and forth to the Fire Authority and coming back and giving us briefings. And then all these other people milling around.

So I went over there like—maybe—I don't know if I went that day or the next day, but I went late in the day, looked around, and realized that I had to get involved, that we needed leadership and I had to—it's funny when you're in a situation like that. People need somebody to say it's okay, it's not okay. Not to tell them what to do, but just to be their point person, you know, where they can go and complain about this or that, and then you can try and fix it. And I could see—and I just remember driving back from Albertson's to my mother's and thinking, I have to do this. I don't want to do this. I have to do this. I don't want to do this. But knowing that ultimately I had to do it.

And, um—and then I just—my life just went on hold, and everything became the fire. And there's that adrenaline rush of constant crisis, dealing with things. And that's mostly what I do in many areas of my life, you know. Gene's having a problem because there's this going on or that going on, and I go away and I try to fix it, you know. Fran set up an information booth. Mary was doing briefings. Um, Ray Vargas was there with his big RV, and all these teenage boys were there. He started organizing food, you know, dinners coming in. Security, um—it just grew. And I was there all the time.

VJ: In many ways, this must have been, um, a setting that you were almost comfortable with, given that you are so experienced in—with crises, that this was a—this was a place where you could really show your full—

DJ: Yes.

VJ: —your full strength and full capabilities.

DJ: Yes. And that's why I knew that I had to do it. But, what's really interesting, and this is the hard part for me, is that—so then you have all these other—Red Cross and all these places. They weren't coming to where we were. They had the shelter or—anyway, everybody wanted to work through *them*. The county was setting up these centers at their facilities, doing everything with them. It took a week and a half for people to realize that we were the hub. They weren't.

[0:49:37]

But then what was really hard for me is that I would need services, and I didn't know who was at these centers, I didn't know who to call. And different people would like talk to people there. Like I tried to call the Orange County Rescue Mission to see what services they had for our residents, and it was—it was a Saturday, and—and I called, and so I get a tape recording saying, "Give money to help the victims." And there was no way for a victim to get help on that phone message, you know. I mean, I was insulted by that.

And then—and then the—the other agencies—we were treated as victims, and we weren't treated as helpers, and we were both. And, um, and that was very hard for me personally, because nobody knew who I was or what I did. Other people, you know, around the county, they had no idea.

VJ: And yet you'd been so busy trying to get the community to sort of work together.

DJ: The community knew, but the fire people didn't know. The county supervisor's office knew, but the other people, the Red Cross didn't know, the Rescue Mission, they didn't know, and they actually patronized me, which was very hard for me. (chuckles) You know.

VJ: I mean, in many ways, you know, you became sort of one of the leaders of this community and—at a time when the community learned to organize itself and sort of organize its own, uh, its own, um, support, its own help. And then in the cases of crises when, you know, big organizations step in to take over where people are not used to take charge and select their leaders, as would have probably been the case in many of the, uh, the outlying suburbs of Portola Hills, where these services are essential because really there's no one there. There's a little bit of a dis—of a conflict there.

DJ: Yeah. It was difficult. And like Supervisor Campbell's office wanted to give \$100,000 to the victims, and I thought they were going to give it to us, and they wound up giving it to the Orange County Foundation. And it was like—which was hard for me, too, because first they were talking to me and I thought they were going to give it to me. And it was like—it was like they couldn't trust me with \$100,000, and I've run multimillion dollar programs all over the world. (chuckles) And it was—it was—that part of it was very hard for me. And that—and that wasn't hard for other people because they didn't—they weren't—they didn't have my experience.

But I just have to say that I couldn't have done what I did without Fran Williams. Um, and her staying with me made a huge difference. The two of us were able to talk things through. And Fran handles the money. And we were getting hundreds of people who wanted to help. And then there were special needs

that were showing up. And she was in the background the whole time, just taking care of that.

And then, through this whole event, um, there's so many people who took over core areas of relief. Chay Peterson was one, who you're going to talk to later today. And we just formed this group of people who just—we just get things done, you know. And everybody had their own area. And it almost—and it almost evolved like organically, like naturally, you know. And that—I mean, that was incredible. You let—you give people the freedom to do what they can do and to be what they can be, and as long as they're people who are reliable and dependable, I mean, it worked out really, really well.

But I couldn't have—and Gene—I couldn't have—and Mary and her briefings and—people just really rallied together. And I wasn't the only one who made that decision to put my life on hold. People like Paula, people who had families or children, they did that too. Well, Chay has children too. Chay was actually in the canyon. But, um—and I just knew it was going to be a couple of months.

And I—you know, that's the other thing, like you're talking—like we were talking about these organizations. If you read all the literature, they sound like you evacuate and then you go back, and then in a couple of weeks everything is back to normal. No. No. I mean, we had the threat of mudslides, we had people who had lost their homes, we had to figure out how to deal with them. I was working with all the counties trying to get services out here, you know. I mean, it—and then with the people who lost their homes, too—but it's like—

Okay, first of all, everybody thinks that you work with these Red Cross shelters, which nobody was—people were staying there, but they weren't, you know, spending any time there. And then this emergence of Camp Silverado at Albertson's, which was a movement among us. And—and I've talked to Fire Authority people and things like this. People have to understand that in situations like this we're not all low-income, uneducated people who don't know what to do. A lot of us who are victims *do* know what to do. We have tremendous resources and capabilities, and their disaster models need to begin to recognize that and incorporate that. Because disasters tend to hit hardest in low-income areas, where you have people who aren't educated because of construction or, you know, whatever. And—and it wasn't like that.

But, the other thing that I was going to say, um—I don't remember. You can move on to your next question.

VJ: Um, I wanted to get back to the evacuation. You decided to evacuate before, um, an evacuation notice was issued.

DJ: Yes.

- VJ: Um, was it not hard for you to leave—I mean, I look around here, and it's so beautifully furnished. You've put so much love and care into this, and there must be many pieces where you had to decide, oh, I'm going to—I'm going to—
- DJ: No. Because it—no. No. I had no idea that there was any real danger. I—I didn't even take my papers. See, that's the one thing I learned. If I evacuate again, my personal financial papers, my insurance papers come with me. I—I—I did not believe it for a second. I am the one who was standing down there thinking the wind could shift, but there was no real sense that my home was in danger, which is absolutely crazy.
- VJ: Which is particularly crazy—if I may take that word from you—because you were the president of the Inter-Canyon League and so experienced with crises, and here, I think maybe for the first time, there was a moment where you could have possibly been the victim and not the organizer, and not the helper. Um, and maybe the victim role for you is not at all a familiar one.
- DJ: Yes, it is, actually.
- VJ: It is?
- DJ: Yes. I've been a victim many times. I've been a victim of a number of crimes and things like that, yeah. So—but—but it hasn't, um—the other thing that's so hard about this particular situation—first of all, when I left, I never believed that there was real danger to my home, which, as I said, was crazy. That was totally a psychological defense. But the other thing was, I thought it would just be like two or three days. I had no idea. And *that's* what made it so hard, was being evacuated for two weeks. And then from hour to hour hearing about how the fire's coming down into Silverado. They beat it back. It's coming down here. And being totally reliant upon like the *Orange County Register* and other media, which we watched the media reports every night, and they were all wrong. And we knew that because we had our own sources of—they didn't even identify the canyons right, you know. So, that—the stress. And then coming back here, and then we had these big meetings and they say we have to evacuate. I mean, the stress has just been incredible.
- VJ: So, um, the, um, the stress and uncertainty of evacuation lasted for about two weeks. Um, seeing, um, on TV how the fire, um, progressed, and uh, and then devoured, you know—you're seeing random properties must have been—it must have been a shocking experience even if it wasn't your home.
- DJ: We learned a lot about fire, that you—you can read as much as you want, and you can study the information, but to actually follow it, hour by hour, and see how it would run up the hills. And then, I think all of us were just awestruck by realizing that one house could be burned, and the house right next to it could not be. And

getting some sort of insight into why that happened, you know, with the embers and things like that. That—it was a real learning experience about fire, for us.

And then, also, we learned a lot about the defenses against a fire, because we knew when the fire trucks were in there and when they—like, you know, they pulled them all out of Modjeska at one point and things like that.

But I think the other thing that hasn't been really, um, verbalized in this—in this setting, now a lot of the politicians and the fire authorities are saying, you know, Clean up around your house, clean up around your house. And as I said, we've been doing this for many years already. But the truth is, like Phil McWilliams' house had defensible space around it. Phil was the administrator of the Fire Safe Council. He went to all the fire safety things. He knew the stuff down pat. And we just have to realize, um, like when I was in Banda Aceh after the tsunami, that what happened in Modjeska was a huge fireball came in and just took out houses. There was nothing that could have been done to save those houses.

I was on a TV show a couple of weeks ago, and I had mentioned this to the reporter before, and he did some research, and he found out that they were—the Fire Authority had cited 740 properties for, um, fire safety violations like within the past I don't know how many years. Not a single one of those homes was a house that burned. And so, if you look at it from a larger perspective, this emphasis on defensible space and home safety, it's good, and we need to be responsible for things like that.

[0:59:59]

But the truth of the matter is, is that, ultimately, it probably doesn't make too much difference. Fire is a tremendous force, and it is a force that we as human beings cannot harness. And there are times, and the earth is repeatedly demonstrating this, when we just have to bow to the will of nature and just accept what happens to us. And that's kind of what happened here.

VJ: That must be—that must be hard to accept, though, especially when you work in disaster relief and—and—and crisis response.

DJ: The thing that's I think difficult for people to understand is that *all* of us experience disasters in our lives. Um, most of the time they aren't as—this was different. This was a community-level disaster. Most of the time they're personal disasters. The pain—human pain is human pain, and it's the same as to whether you lose your house, you lose a child, or sometimes you lose your car, you know. Um, it's just pain. And what—the redemptive factor in all of the situations, overseas and here, is the compassion that showed in the aftermath. And, um, and that really happened here. And I think that everybody who lost a home would tell you how overwhelmed they were by the generosity of the people in the canyon and by the community.

And I can talk as long as I want to about the characters in the canyon, but the truth is, is that we do all pull together, and we all help each other in a way that is just—it's unparalleled. The firefighters talked about it when they were here. We had firefighters come in from all over the country, and they said that they'd never seen anything like, um, our community and how we worked together and what we did for each other.

VJ: I mean, that showed, um—during the evacuation?

DJ: And during the firefighting. We still had residents in here who were working with the firefighters.

VJ: Um, and this probably must have also showed when you came back to the canyon after two weeks. Tell me about that. That must have been quite the—quite a moment.

DJ: Well, one thing that I don't know that people realize is we set up a relief committee while we were still in the parking lot at Albertson's. About fifteen of us got together at a restaurant, and we set up committees and responsibilities. And then the evacuation was lifted and we headed back in here. Um, we had several problems when we came back. First, we had tons and tons of donated goods that we had to store someplace and get distributed. We had cash that we'd been given that had to be distributed. So we had to identify people's needs.

Um, then we had the threat of mudslides, which right from the beginning the Fire Authority and the county was telling us was a huge hazard, and it would take out homes and kill people. And we had to organize several large community meetings about that. We had to get—oh, and then we had hundreds of people who wanted to volunteer and help. And so we had to organize volunteer days. This is a lot of stuff to do right when you just get back to your houses. And we—we did it all. I had people who stepped up to the plate for each one of those things and just, you know, stepped in. We got—the county started bringing out hay bales, we got a grant for jute cloth, and we did all these erosion control measures. We went and made sure the creeks were clean. We did a tremendous amount of work after we came back for the next like five or six weeks. We had—

But you know what's interesting, too. We had all these people who wanted to help, and, um, and I have to say I don't go and participate in those things, because I'm really busy with all the stuff I'm doing on the phone and the writing and things here.

VJ: You're not down at the creek?

DJ: No, I'm not down at the creek. No. I can only do so much. But what was really interesting—because the first day, I went over to Phil McWilliams to help clean up his debris, and that—that weekend we were expecting all these people from outside, but do you know who was doing all the work? It was us. We were all

helping each other. So all these people we're expecting from outside didn't show up, but we all showed up, and we all worked really—or they all worked really hard in Modjeska cleaning things up.

VJ: When you say people from outside, do you mean organizations or volunteers from the outside?

DJ: Volunteers. What wound up happening—and this isn't surprising either—is, um, um, like with the mudslides we just had, we had eighty volunteers last weekend to shovel the mud out of these houses. And they were all the Mormons, the Latter Day Saints. They're very strong on volunteer efforts. And they've—they've turned out to be the group who has just over and over again really showed up to help out here in the canyons. So we have those people coming in from outside, but then the rest of it is—it's us.

And when—when we came back here and we had all those things we had to do, um, we were having meetings about every other night. Um, we would meet in Modjeska and, um, go over who was doing what. I mean, it was a big job. I had to do needs assessments. We went door to door with surveys so people could write down what they needed and give it to us so we would have documentation. And then, when we got the million dollars, then everything broke loose.

VJ: Tell me about that.

DJ: Oh, that was—that was wild. So—Bob Hunt, who is the vice president of the Inter-Canyon League, calls me a couple days after I got back in the house. I just have to say, I was so happy to get back to my house. Now, I can say that I didn't think that I was going to lose it, but that feeling of gratitude when I came back, it lasted for like three days, and it was *really* intense. And I was just so happy.

But, anyway, so Bob calls me and he says that he had gotten a phone call and they wanted to know how much we would need to like, you know, make the place whole again or something, and Bob says—off the top of his head he just said a million dollars. And they said, Okay. You'll be hearing from us. And then like the next day he calls me and he says, "Well, they called back again. They wanted our bank account number, and they said to expect a large deposit." And I said, "Okay." Well, I thought it'd be like a hundred grand, you know. And, um—

VJ: Which would have been terrific.

DJ: Yes. It would have been wonderful. So then—then he calls back like the third day, and he says, "Debbie, it's a million dollars." (laughs) And I said, "What?" (laughs) I was ecstatic. But that was before I know how much—how much trouble this was going to be. I mean, I'm still ecstatic, but it just was a lot of trouble. (chuckles)

VJ: Right. So you have these million dollars—

DJ: Which has to go to fire victims. All I got was an email that said it has to go to fire victims. And we had been promising the community in all of these meetings that—we had a big fundraiser the weekend we came back. We raised \$22,000 for the fire victims. Because every—

VJ: And these \$22,000 probably mostly came out of the community, right?

DJ: Yes. But I have to tell you one thing. Um, I'm the one who started collecting money at Albertson's, and the only reason I did was because a guy came up to me and started handing—and handed me \$100. And that's when I thought, Oh, I should be collecting cash, you know. But you know who gave a lot of the money down at Albertson's were firefighters, which I thought was really interesting. They were big—big donors to us.

But, anyway, so, um, so we got the million dollars, and then we had promised the community that [recorder skips]—and the restrictions were it had to help fire victims. So we just thought we could just divvy it up among all the people who lost their house. Now, that's not as easy as it sounds because there are like multiple families living in houses, there were empty houses, people who weren't married living in—I mean, you know, it was complicated.

So we were working on this for three weeks, and a lot of people called and offered to help. And this attorney, who helps us in other things, offered to do pro bono. And finally, after three weeks, she told us that we couldn't do that, that everything had to be needs based. So we had to set up a whole system to evaluate the needs of people who had lost their houses, and then make—make, um, grants to them on the basis of their needs. So that's a whole different thing than just taking the money and splitting it up. And that created—some people were pretty upset about that. The IRS only lets you—it allowed that to happen after 9/11, but it made a special exception for that. So I had to set up an outside committee to evaluate applications, I had to write applications, we had to collect documentation from the people who lost their homes when they had specific needs. It's been a big process.

VJ: So to clarify, it wasn't about equal split amongst the victims, and it wasn't about the losses suffered, but the needs. There's a difference, right?

DJ: Yes. Although, losses suffered is related to needs. And it turns out, some of the people were very underinsured, most of them were pretty underinsured. But their expenses, like just clearing their sites, there's a lot of costs that are not necessarily covered by insurance. And, so just trying to document what they needed and seeing how—we helped—we gave everybody immediate grants for housing and food, and then we split up the twenty-two thousand from the fundraiser. There were some people who were renters who lost things. There was a difference between just losing your household possessions and then losing your whole house, so—

It's been a lot of talk about how to—among us—about how to divide this up. So we have this outside committee that makes recommendations. I'm on that, and Fran's on that, Joanne Leatherby from Modjeska, and then Ed Sauls, who was a leader of the relief effort in Laguna Beach. And then they—the committee makes recommendations, and then the Inter-Canyon League board votes on it and has the ultimate authority.

[0:69:58]

- VJ: So misgivings about the—the distribution of this \$1 million gift from the—
- DJ: It was from Kane Ranch. They own a lot of open space around the canyon.
- VJ: Mm-hmm. Um, the people that had misgivings were those people that anticipated more? Or maybe quicker money?
- DJ: Yes. (laughs) I would say that, yes. And again, it all comes down to personalities, you know. I mean, yes. They wanted us to just split it up—a few people wanted us to just split it up and just give them their share and be done with it, and not have restrictions on it or anything like that. And I should have known better. But, you know, I was traumatized too in trying to deal with all of this stuff, and it did take the lawyer three weeks. I was not happy about that. She should have gotten that to us in a week, after we got that money. It was just a—it was just a, um, the guidelines for disaster relief, you know, from the IRS. It's like an eleven page booklet.
- VJ: So you probably still have a good chunk of that money to be administered.
- DJ: Well, we're trying to—we're trying to distribute it as quickly as possible, and we actually only have about \$300,000 dollars left. We've given away around \$700,000 in the past, since January. We started giving away the money in January. So that's five months.
- VJ: Now, this money, does that allow people to rebuild? Does that mean that people will be able to—
- DJ: No. It's—no. If you look at it, if we had split it up, each person would have gotten around eighty thousand. So it's not enough to rebuild. And you'd be surprised how much the contents were worth. I mean, when you—when you try to figure out how much the contents of your house is, you don't realize how much money you have invested just in like towels and sheets and kitchen appliances and things like that. It really adds up. Most of the people lost probably between sixty and a hundred thousand dollars. And then a lot of them also had tools, and the tools are really expensive. That'd be like another \$50,000 worth of tools, you know.

So they suffered losses that—that the insurance didn't cover. And this is a crazy thing. They had motorcycles that they didn't have insured. Two of them had—we

didn't, of course—we're not—we can't give grants for anything like that, but we gave grants for like temporary housing. We helped one—we helped two people buy RV trailers. That's another issue that I would just like to address briefly.

When the people lost their homes, they usually went to stay with relatives, and that lasted usually three to four weeks. And then there'd be fighting and things that started. Not always. So then they'd move to another temporary situation for a few months, and then maybe to another one. And if you read the disaster relief literature, it sounds as though, you know, people lose their homes, they're in a temporary place, and then they go to a—like a more permanent place until their house is rebuilt. But it doesn't work like that. They move several different times.

So we've been helping with temporary housing, we've been helping with tool replacement, and then there's—we helped with some retaining walls because of the damage from the fire to the lots, and things like that. So—with each person it's different, but we've been trying to help with things that's not really part of the rebuilding necessarily. Some of the people who were underinsured—we did give money to help with rebuilding, because they were grossly underinsured.

VJ: But, um, you also suggested that being underinsured is somewhat common.

DJ: Yes. Insurance is expensive, yeah. We had—there's a couple of other issues I'd like to raise that, um—one of the women who lost her house was diagnosed with terminal cancer like a week before the fire, and we've been trying to really get help to her quickly because she's undergoing chemo and radiation. And I can't imagine anything worse than being told you have six months to live and a few weeks later seeing your house burn. And then there's another family—another woman who got very sick last year. She's disabled. And, for people who have health problems, trying to deal with a barrage of bureaucracy and all the problems that arise when, you know, you lose a house like this. I mean, it's just really heart breaking.

VJ: So it probably is almost discouraging to even go to the effort of rebuilding something.

DJ: Well, you have to respect that person's decision. I mean, I would certainly—if I was in that situation, I would certainly question it. But, you know, it's their decision.

VJ: You mean you would question whether it's—whether it's worth rebuilding?

DJ: Yeah. If I had just been diagnosed with a terminal illness and I had the choice of spending the next six months of my life rebuilding a house or—I mean, I don't know what I would do, but it would *definitely* be something I would consider.

VJ: Yeah.

DJ: But she didn't have any second thoughts about it. She just wanted to go ahead.

VJ: Um, does this—does this—um, this aftermath of the fire still, um, sort of, um, dominate your—or does it still take away from your—from your work routine?

DJ: Um, yes. I spend about four hours a day on stuff related to the canyons. Um, I will say, the fire was at the end of October, I left December eleventh for Angola, um, to look at opening up childcare centers there, which I've started my own nonprofit. I was just starting my own nonprofit. And I will have to say that I was so happy to leave (laughs). There I went over to Huambo, Angola, to a country that's totally devastated, and I saw really heart-breaking things. But it was just so nice to be out of the intensity of the fire and the relief effort for a week. That was really nice.

Um, and then I came back and had to set up the committee and design the applications and—I mean, it is—it consumes a huge amount of my time. And I'm a free—I work freelance, and so you have to maintain your contacts, you have to push ahead to get jobs, and by taking those two months and not being able to do anything, I mean, my income really dropped.

VJ: Um, and then of course more disasters happened with mudslides.

DJ: Yes.

VJ: And the—and the—and the fear of mudslides.

DJ: We did everything we could though. I mean, we really worked for months with the jute cloth and the hay bales, and we've done pretty much everything that can be done over in Modjeska. And again, like at the end of Silverado there's been some mudslide activity, but there's nothing you can do. I mean, we just have to realize that there is only so much we can do. And even the hay bales, I mean, a lot of this stuff is—provides a tremendous amount of psychological relief, and perhaps some tangible relief, but ultimately, is a hay bale going to stop a mudslide? (laughs) I don't think so. (laughs)

VJ: Do you think the fire sort of changed the canyon community, and also your relationship to the canyon community?

DJ: Yes. Yes. That relief committee was incredible, those fifteen people or twelve, or however many it was. Seeing all those people step out of their lives and just dedicate themselves to this. And then, we've started working together more. There were different factions within the community. We've gotten to know each other and have a great deal of respect for each other, and we're cooperating much more. It has always been the case that when push came to shove we pulled together, even though it didn't look like it. And we have very, very vocal people out here. But, um, there's always been this sense of bonding among us, and we are very, very different, you know.

And after the fire, it was just—yes, and people really got to know *me* because I had to speak. I wasn't interviewed a lot on the media. Other people in the canyon were

interviewed a lot on the media. But I had to speak at a lot of events. I had to give speeches. And I felt that I should do that on behalf of the canyon. And, um—so—and most people now in the canyon know me because they've seen me talk at things like that. So that's made a little bit of a difference, I think.

VJ: Do you anticipate the next fire season with anxiety?

DJ: I don't think any more so. Because we've always known—I mean there have been a lot of fires out here. If you do your history of the fires, you'll see. I mean, there's quite a few. They just haven't threatened the canyon. You know, there's been a lot down at the mouth of the canyon and, um—no. To tell you the truth, I'm probably more worried about mudslides. And I'm not worried about mudslides for my home, but for other people's homes. And I'm also worried, like what if—what's going to happen—you know, we're going to give away the rest of the money and then we're not going to have money to help people. And that's been such a blessing to have this money, which—even if it—even if seventy or eighty thousand dollars can't do *that* much, it can do something, and at least it tells people that there's other people who care, and that the community cares about them. And I think that that's *really* important. I mean, just think of what a blessing that is. I mean, how many people who lose everything have somebody come and give them a check like that, you know, just because of their loss?

VJ: Well, you know—you personally probably know the answer is hardly ever. Because you—you are out there and you see people in crises and disasters, and they are, uh, being left pretty much surrounded—

DJ: Yes.

VJ: I mean, we are more in the headlines right now, but this may be a much more common reality for people in disasters.

[0:80:02]

DJ: Right. It is. Yeah. There's one other thing. I had a fire in my apartment when I was at Stanford, and it—the apartment—it didn't totally burn down, but—and it was very traumatic for me. I had just had surgery, and I'd been mugged, and, um, and then I had this fire. But it's very interesting, because having a fire in your own apartment is very different from having your community burn. And, um, and I've tried to talk about this with people out here. I organized a therapy session for all of us who helped. We had that like three weeks ago, and I'll tell you about that in just a second. But, um, but I have such a—and I think other people feel this, too. I think Paula LaBar feels it. It's almost like a wounding in the spirit because of the damage that the community has suffered. And that's not to say that it's not pulling together in a different way, or that it's stronger, or whatever clichés you want to use. But the community as a whole has been wounded, and, um, and that's very different than having an individual loss.

So about the therapy session. What's really interesting, those of us who basically gave up our lives for a couple of months attended a little group debriefing that we had some county mental health facilitators at. And we just talked about some of the issues. It wasn't, you know—but anyway, but what we wound up with was that we needed to start potlucks. We used to have potlucks when I first took over the Inter-Canyon League, so we kind of decided we would start potlucks again so that we could relate to each other informally and casually and maintain these bonds, you know, between us in a less structured way than our meetings, where we're trying to get work done.

And that's another thing, as a result of the fire, I mean, the work that we have to do as an organization has just really increased. We just got this \$250,000 federal grant to get rid of the dead and dying trees and hazardous vegetation, and that's been a whole other community issue because there's people who want to save the trees, people who want to cut the trees. It goes back to what we talked about brush clearance at the beginning. So I'm trying to reach a happy compromise with everybody with that right now. That's the focus of my attention.

VJ: Can you ever see yourself getting tired of this intense involvement and deciding to pull out of this and step back? Or can you even see yourself moving out of the canyon?

DJ: Well, I—I did tell the Park Board last week that I wasn't running for my seat again. And, um—it's possible. I mean, I've been here for twenty years, and that's a really long time. And I am a person who needs a great deal of stimulation. But, um, but I love it here, and I love the canyon, and a lot of my really close friends live here, so—I don't know. My life right now is in a transition. Starting up the nonprofit, trying to figure out how to get all of that going, it's very difficult, because I'm used to very, very—you know, billion dollar a year nonprofits, so I don't want to do just a really small one, I want to do something that's sort of in the middle. And, um—so I have a lot going on.

I actually—I just finished a book about my experiences with all these other disasters, although I did write a little bit about the fire. And, um, and that's something that I've needed to do for a long time. It's the first book I've done. I've written dozens of television shows, but, um, it's the first book. And once—

VJ: What's the title?

DJ: *An Ordinary Life: A Global Journey of Self-Discovery*. And, um, and it's—part of, um, part of the thing for me has been—and people who live out here will tell you this—is that people out here help me do my life. The stuff that I do over in Africa, I couldn't do now if I didn't have one person who comes over and takes care of my house, someone who comes over and takes care of my yard. I have people who take care of my mail, I have people who take care of my bills. I was in Africa when I was running for the Park Board last time, and all of a sudden all these

people decided to run against me. Well, I couldn't do a campaign. So people here just did the whole campaign for me. I mean, they did the signs, they did everything. And I have so much support and so much love and—and help from people here. And I've had surgeries and they come and take me to meetings, you know, and bring me food, and—I mean, it's just, you know, it's just really heart-warming, the whole spirit of what happens here.

Well, I think—okay. I think the one thing that I would like to add is that, if you read the histories of the canyon—and I put together a history for a grant proposal that I was working on, and just knowing what it was like when I first got involved, that people were thinking the canyons were filled with characters and very feisty, independent, wrong-headed—or wrong type of thinking people. And to really understand that the canyons are filled with resilient people, people who are extremely competent, people who care about each other. I think that if there's one message that I would like to leave, it's that the people in the canyons are extraordinary people, and, um, we went through an extraordinary experience.

VJ: Thank you. And I think that's a good and final comment in our oral history conversation with Deborah Johnson, President of the Inter-Canyon League here in the Silverado Canyon. My name is Volker Janssen, and, uh, that's the end.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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