- Let me just read this and we'll get going here.

Okay, good morning, Heather.

My name is Janice Pope and I'm here today

with Heather Higgins.

It is 1040 on September 20th, 2025.

And we are recording this interview

at the Blowing Rock Art and History Museum

in Blowing Rock, North Carolina.

This interview is part of an oral history project

documenting personal experiences

and memories of Hurricane Helene.

Thank you so much for taking your time

to be with us and share your story today.

So to begin with, if you'd just tell me

a little bit about yourself and your ties

to the area, Heather.

- I live in the western section of Watauga County

and I have lived in Watauga County

for approximately 26 years.

- Great.

So what was your first memory

of hearing the storm was coming?

- Well, I would say my experience is

your life doesn't stop for mother nature.

And so my first indication that this was serious

was certainly hearing the word catastrophic.

But I was in the process of having a very ill dog.

I had to drive down to Hickory after two hip surgeries.

So the day that the, I think it was the day prior

to Helene hitting, I was driving my dog down

through Blowing Rock when that tornado happened

and I thought, "Ooh, this is not a good sign."

None of this is a good sign.

So yeah, even hearing catastrophic

and growing up in Florida, I knew like catastrophic meant

but it wasn't, it really wasn't closing in until

that morning when someone knocked on my door and said,

"If you wanna get out, you gotta get out now.

You got 30 minutes and you won't be able

to drive out of here."

So.

- And what did you do at that point?

- Well, I was kind of like, you know,

"Where do I go?

My daughter lives by a creek."

And they were like, "Well, just come with us."

You know, I was like, "I don't know where to go.

I got nowhere else to go."

So that's what I did is I went with some neighbors

up to their house.

- Okay.

And how did your house fare in the storm?

- It fared better than something around me

but the crawl space was thoroughly flooded and took out,

only took out my heating source

but that wasn't really replaced until like mid December

because a lot of people were in that boat.

But as far as what else surrounded me,

yeah, I was very lucky.

And I feel initially, you know,

outside of what I was going through in my own life

and trying to connect with everybody

because you had to go to town, there was no self-service.

You kind of feel initially really grateful.

Like you see everything around you and realize,

'cause it just trickles in,

you have no source outside of other people

who've seen it, what's going on.

But then you're kind of hit with guilt.

You know, you're seeing your neighbors, you know.

And I live on a working class side of this county.

So yeah, it just, it wears on you.

- Yeah.

How did your community come together?

During what you said somebody showed up at your house

to get you out. - Yeah.

Well, initially that was it.

I mean, we had a mudslide and it caused the creek,

which became a river,

to just go around the other houses around me.

So the only way out that I had seen from anywhere,

'cause I, you know, like I said,

I had no way of getting in touch with anyone

unless I went into town.

So that was a process that was over.

You know, an hour long to get into town.

That should have taken 15 minutes

because the roads weren't passable.

So it really was the community

that was out there clearing the road.

So yeah, I'm in a farming area.

So they were out there with their bulldozers,

moving debris and trees out of the way

so that at least there was like a one lane section

so others could access the way out.

- Did y'all eat together?

I mean, were there,

did you have like community gatherings?

- No, I did not.

- And I live alone, so no.

We kind of had some amount of contact,

but it wasn't like a Thanksgiving.

- No, I was just thinking about

when the power goes out and all the food has to be getting--

- Yeah, that all got thrown.

(laughing)

Yeah, like I said, I, two days after Helene,

I called, I tried to get to Publix parking lot.

That was my cellular phone booth is what I called it.

So it was quite obvious that her kidneys

and liver were failing.

So I had to drive down there and do that.

So there was just this weird, just amount of loss

that it was, yeah, it was just kind of all overwhelming.

And you just kind of, I don't know,

it was a detachment almost because it was overload

initially, I think.

- Yeah, I'm sorry about your dog.

- It was, it was an awful thing

and why don't I bring it up?

- Well, no.

- My dog doesn't even like.

- I mean, that's really important.

So you spent the night with your neighbors or not?

- No, I did go back later after,

you know, several hours after the storm.

Was it till it was safe to go?

I actually had walked with one of my neighbors

who was up there as well.

We just walked and took in everything that was,

I mean, it was just, I mean, I don't know how many times

I said, wow, like I just can't believe what I'm seeing.

So we both walked to see if we could even

access somebody's driveway to get back to our houses.

- So I guess you've talked about your challenges

this first few days.

What about meaningful acts of kindness

that you saw or experienced?

- I felt like, I felt like anyone who could help

I, you know, even just trying to get to my daughter

who lived in, who lives outside of Mountain City.

I mean, 421 was not drivable.

And then 321 was cut off,

but there was access around the lake.

And that was another at least hour for me to get

to something that took me 20 minutes usually to get to her.

But I was so immensely thankful that I had access to that.

But on those routes, it's like impassable or one lane

and everyone, you know, was patient enough to wait

for whether it was the electrical people

or just trying to repair the road.

I just felt like everybody was, I don't know.

Like I say, there was a level of gratitude as well as yes,

your community is all you have in situations like that.

It takes forever for other organizations to come in.

And I would say the first organizations that I saw

first was Wine to Water and then it was Samaritan's Purse.

But as far as anything, you know, outside of our community

I really didn't see.

And it was distressing to, you know, think, you know

five days in and, you know, it's like,

I don't think anyone's coming.

You know, you understand why people feel that way

because it really is, it's on us to help one another.

- Yeah.

How long were you without power?

- Well, that was the weird thing.

I was not without power for long.

After I threw out all my food that, you know, was old,

the power came back on.

So we must be on, something important is on our grid

that it came on right away because no,

everybody else did not have power for a long time.

So that was something that was just rather bizarre to have.

- And so what did that mean?

Are you, I suspect you're on a pump and so a water pump.

- Yes, which going through anything up here is, yeah.

I realized I, from an ice storm,

I realized I was not a pioneer woman.

I very much depend on water

and just having access to a flushing toilet is immense.

So yeah.

- Yeah.

What stands out to you the most about the recovery process

for you and your community, I guess?

- Yeah, I guess, you know, it'll go,

maybe the journal entry will make sense.

I didn't realize how much this would affect me

and how much depression and really an altered sense

of how I felt about this community and,

or just, I don't know,

it just really kind of entered in

and didn't leave those struggles

and just the differences.

I mean, obviously once leaves come,

things are kind of hidden, but yeah, it just kind of altered.

And I mean, there's no utopia, so it's not just this area.

So it's a wake up call to, I think, a lot of people.

And this wasn't evenly distributed through the county either.

So that's why I say a lot of people,

you know, and I'm a cleaning lady, so go,

once I could go in and clean,

once people's power were gone and, which took a while,

you know, I did feel this kind of like,

kind of irritation with people.

Like you have down limbs, you know,

I have people whose poses are just right, you know.

It's not the same thing.

Yeah, I don't know.

Doesn't always bring out the best feelings in you, but.

- Right, sure.

Well, you've referenced this journal entry.

Tell me about that.

Do you want to share that?

- Yes, I would.

- Okay.

- I think it was just this,

and I hadn't gone back and read it,

but when I read about what you guys were doing today,

I immediately thought of it, and I thought,

my journal entries can be, you know,

there could be a dream and they could go political,

or, you know, who knows where it goes.

But it was this specific journal entry that I thought of,

and I went back and I reread it,

and I was like, I really would like to share that.

- I would love for you to share that.

- Okay.

- Well, thank you.

- Thank you, thank you.

- So, the journal entry is from 1226-24.

A clang of Funkin's fog,

mire the route to a new year.

Routine upon sunshine allows for second nature comfort.

But when light dims in the patches of darkness,

clouds blind visibility in a vertigo of time.

Every curve becomes fragmental memories,

and they're not as far or further along than I thought.

Ghostly, it contorts all reason.

I wish to interact, yet tire and retreat,

just like the lowly mist loitering about my path,

committed to my bivalent, more atmosphere,

hovering only in the halfway.

Hiking once provided respite,

an earthy escape of heightened energy,

intertwining calm and strength,

a vast lush line cathedral,

harboring spiritual sustenance.

The mother of all mothers sways a heavy hand.

Her dualistic nature can wildly capture the landscape

in a heaven and hell upheaval,

scarring its awe-inspiring allure.

Water and wind act as sculptures,

slapping clay upon a wheel,

whole mountainsides flattened,

piling trees into ripple matchsticks,

while sparing the other half intact.

Rain becomes river-riding of what once babbled as creek,

sliding foundations of soil and structures

as effortlessly as a leaf coasting upon a stream.

The aftermath of instability left beauty

buried beneath the rubble.

(sniffling)

It's foolish to assume anything remains constant.

You're an I do for it within the grief of change.

Mm, sorry.

Months after have only sharpened sorrow.

Revamped vistas incorporate the lives of others.

Homes broken apart become monuments to a chaotic force,

a frozen gesture of an existence no longer the same.

A daily wear and tear upon the heart,

psyche altered as well by the circle X's remainder.

Thank you for sharing that.

I didn't know I'd get emotional over that.

Well, yes, of course you do.

Of course you do.

Would you mind if we took a picture of that?

Oh, sure.

Let's do that.

I would like to do that.

'Cause it's so beautiful, and I couldn't help,

but notice that your penmanship is so beautiful.

(laughing)

I'm weird about everything.

No, you're Rochester.

Backbound is I've gotten older.

Poetry and sculpture speak to me more than they are.

Yeah, that may be true.

As we get older.

Yeah, as we get older.

You know, the words and the structures of things.

Thank you so much.

I'm so sorry that I don't, you know,

I'll always say to my students,

now be sure you've got tissues.

I don't know.

Here I am with it.

I'm always raw, just yeah.

It's just me.

Well, Heather, I appreciate you being here so much.

Well, thank you so much.

I'm gonna turn this off.