

Hurricane Helene Interview Transcript

Priscilla Dunn: You wouldn't think that somebody from Hickory would have a story, but I've got a story.

Ginger Eggert: Exactly. That's what's good. It's a unique story, so that's what we're looking for.

Priscilla Dunn: Yeah, yeah, because I was not supposed to have been up in that mess, but I ended up getting caught in that mess, so I'll tell you all about it today.

Ginger Eggert: So, I'll start. My name is Ginger Eggert, and I'm a student at Appalachian State University, and I just want to take about 30 minutes of your time to talk about your experience with Hurricane Helene. So, to sort of start off, could you tell me a bit about yourself and your ties to the storm and your community?

Priscilla Dunn: Okay, so my name is Priscilla Dunn. I am an APP alumni. I am from actually from Yancey County, North Carolina which was actually the worst hit County in with Helene but, I do not live there any longer. I live in Hickory, North Carolina I still have children who live in Mitchell County, North Carolina. And my mother lives in Mitchell County, North Carolina. And I have a brother that lives in Mitchell County, North Carolina. So, I still have a lot of family there and I ended up getting involved with Helene because I had gone to Knoxville, Tennessee probably the week before the storm, maybe four or five days before the storm, because my son-in-law had an emergency surgery and my daughter needed help with her infant children. And I so I had rushed over there to help her and we knew the storm was coming. Certainly wasn't expecting it to be what it was, but we knew the storm was coming and, you know, I anticipated I'd be over there and I might stay for a couple extra days. And then I was going to come back home because that weekend was one of our other children's birthdays and we also had a party that we were supposed to go to for a friend's daughter. And so I was going to try to get back by that weekend for sure because we had that party going on for Saturday. So, I want to say Helene might have happened on a Thursday. I can't remember exactly, but I know that I stayed an extra day and let what I thought was the worst of the storm go through. And then I made the decision to come back to Hickory, North Carolina. And what meant for me was that I was going to travel on I-40 from Knoxville, Tennessee, up into, through Asheville, on into Hickory. So, it's about a two and a half hour drive for me, and I do this drive quite a bit because I have my daughters there, and I go and take care of my grandchildren quite a bit. But anyway, so, the day, the next morning after the storm, I want to say it was a Friday, my husband calls me in Knoxville. He's like, Priscilla, you need to get out of there. You know, Kirk, who's my husband's nephew, has called and said that he got word that the dams are going to start breaking. And you need to get out of there because it's going to flood bad in East Tennessee. And I was like, what do you think, you know, it's okay for me to come home? And he was like, yeah, it's fine here in Hickory. We just got a little bit of wind and, you know, you're going to be okay. So I was like, all right, hammer down. So I loaded my car up that morning probably by 10 o'clock. I loaded my car up and I'm coming back home. And there's a part of I-40 called the Gorge that is between Gatlinburg, basically, and Asheville. And it is a very windy part of the interstate and it's actually quite dangerous even on a good a good day. But the day that I was leaving I was flying because I was scared to death that the dams were going to break. And I could see the water was up quite a bit even through Knoxville on some of the rivers through

Knoxville already the water was up really high. But when I got to the gorge the water, I had never seen the river there before. I didn't. I knew that there was probably a river there because you could see the lights of the dam at night sometimes when I came through there. But I had no idea I'd never seen the river before and the river was literally at the white line raging and I was doing probably 85 miles an hour up the road trying to get out of that mess because I was terrified that dam was going to break. And flying up through there and I get and I noticed there wasn't a ton of traffic. And I was able just to skirt right up the mountain and anyway got up to the top of the mountain and continued to drive towards Asheville. And as I started getting closer to Asheville, the Swannanoa River goes normally under I-40, although I wasn't aware of that until the storm. And as I'm getting towards Asheville, I start noticing a lot of cars on the side of the road. Didn't think too much about it, but this will come into play later on. And I just thought maybe people had moved their cars to get them out of water, out of the way of the water or something. And maybe it parked them up on the interstate. And when I got to where the Swannanoa River goes underneath the road normally, although, like I said, never noticed it before, the river was actually over the road. And I stopped and I was like, okay, I know, turn around, don't drown, but a couple vehicles that were in front of me started going through it, and so, I'm sitting there thinking, okay, do I or don't I? And I made the decision to follow them because it seemed that the water was only maybe a foot and a half, two feet deep at that point. So, I followed them and I drove through the water. Okay? Yeah yeah I know I videoed myself doing that I have a video I'll share with you so you can see it. So, drove through the water got to the other side of the river and I was like okay. And then I'm still continuing to drive into Asheville and as I started getting closer to Asheville all of a sudden like there were trees huge trees everywhere across the interstate like everywhere. And then I started realizing oh I'm in a mess and when I got there the wind had already died down but, all the trees there were trees everywhere in the road. And there were a lot of men out with chainsaws trying to at least clear just a single path on the interstate to get vehicles through. There wasn't hardly anybody by the time I got to Asheville there was no really no traffic on the roads just me which should have told me a lot. But stupid me who still continues I'm thinking I'm gonna get home. I've got my son's birthday party. I've got that party on Saturday. I'm gonna get home. So you know I'm weaving through trees I'm driving over tree branches you know and and I noticed that I didn't have any cell phone signal or anything like that and my phone actually was on SOS and I've never seen my phone be on SOS. It had no phone signal or anything. So I continue and I get through Asheville, even though there's trees, there's trees down everywhere, like crazy. It was, it was insane. There were trees everywhere. And I'm still hammered down going home and I'm get, I get out towards an area called Black Mountain. And all of a sudden, traffic comes to a stop. And there's, you know, I'm in, there's a whole lot of 18-winners, and there's a few vehicles, but not a lot. But anyway, we've come to a dead stop. And we sit there for quite a while. And finally, a highway patrolman comes through, and he says, you all need to get off the interstate because the mountain, Black Mountain has collapsed. and he said you are you're gon have to go someplace else and you know maybe by it'll be open by this evening or tomorrow. And I thought okay I'm going to go back to my daughters. So that was my plan. So I thought well I'll just take I-40 and go all the way back to Knoxville and I'm just going to be stuck in Knoxville. And so at that time in Black Mountain I was able to get a phone call through to my husband to tell him that I was going to try to get back to Knoxville and that was my plan. So I turn around they turn us

around they get us off on this two-lane road well anyway on this two-lane road and I've got video from this that I'll share with you there were they put us on this gravel it's not a two-lane road it's a gravel road and uh to turn us around and the um there were like houses with trees all over them like I was like oh my gosh I mean, it was just horrifying to see. And I was like, and I started really at that point started panicking because then I was like, okay, my children are in the mountains. You know, I've got two sons and grandchildren. I have three grandchildren that are in the mountains. And I was so terrified for my grandchildren. And I was worried about my mom at that point. I was starting to worry about, you know, all my family, the friends that I love. Because here's this houses with all these trees down on them, you know. and when I turned back around I lost phone signal again. And I started back towards where I'd come from. And I weave back through the trees back through all the trees and get back on the other side of Asheville to where the Swannanoa River had been previously, you know, about a foot and a half over the water. And there is a fire truck across the interstate sideways. And there were a few tractor and trailers pulled over on the side, but they, I was really one of the only vehicles out on the road at that time. And I parked my vehicle on the interstate, and I got out, and I walked over to the fireman, and I was like, you know, I needn't get to Knoxville. Can I go this way? And he said no. He said that you could tell the river was up probably another 8 to 10 feet at that point. Like, there was no crossing it. It was almost as far as you could see, and I've got some video of this as well that I'll send you. So I took a video of the situation you know and he was like you're gonna have to go somewhere and I said well where do I go? And he said I don't know what to tell you and I went okay you're on your own girl you know you're gonna have to figure this out. So I'm very familiar. Thankfully, I'm very familiar with most of Western North Carolina. I'm very familiar with upper the northern part of South Carolina. I've driven these roads many times. So I my thoughts were okay I'm going to go back to the next exit and there is a um a steakhouse there and I'm going to get me something to eat and I'm just going to sit and figure this out that's what that was my plan so they literally turned me around on the same way that I came in on and I went down I drove the wrong way on the interstate back to the, because there's nobody on there. And I mean, there was no way to get to the other side of the interstate. I drove back to the next exit, which happened to be the Biltmore exit, which, as you know, Biltmore was terribly flooded.

Ginger Eggert: Yes.

Priscilla Dunn: And I thought, well, anyway. I go back to, I go to this where I thought I was going to eat. And when I get off the exit, I notice there's nobody out, nobody. And I still have no phone signal. And I pull in the parking lot and the restaurant's closed, and I'm like, why is this restaurant closed, and then it dawned on me there was no electricity, and then I'm like, oh, crap. So I knew there was a Clarion Hotel there right on that same exit, and I thought, well, I'm going to go up to the hotel, and I'm just going to see if I can get a room to stay the night, So I go to the hotel, and the guy the manager's there, and he's like, listen, I don't even know what rooms I have. He's like, all of our stuff's down. It's been down since yesterday evening. We have no way of knowing. He's like, but you're welcome to have all the food and drinks you want here. Just stay and, you know. And I was like, well, do you care if I stay the night in my vehicle in your parking lot? And he said, no, you can absolutely do that. So anyway, he and I kind of started a little friendship, and he was very, very helpful in, like, for getting me food and snacks because I had no money. You know, my money's on my debit card. So the gas station below the Clarion was open, but it only took cash. I had no cash, nothing. So this gentleman really helped me get

me a snack and get me a drink and that kind of thing. And luckily I was on a very special diet at that time, and I had some of my food with me. So I had food. And when I leave Knoxville, always, and thank goodness I do this, I always make sure I have a full tank of gas. And that saved my butt because I'm going to tell you about this more tomorrow, about when I get into tomorrow, what happens the next day. But anyway, so I ended up staying at the Clarion in the parking lot. Well, because I'm very familiar with downtown Asheville and all that, I thought, well, I'm going to walk down and see what's, you know, going on. You know, look at the flooding and all that. And so I walked down to where the water is. And I was trying to get a phone call out because I still didn't realize that, like, there was no, that I wasn't going to be able to get a phone call out. And ultimately, I couldn't get a phone call out. Nobody knew where I was. My family had no idea. Last time they had talked to me, I was going back to Knoxville, and, you know, and that was it. So my family was in a real panic about me, and I didn't even know that. You know, I was good. Well I get down to the where the water's edge is and they are bringing people out of the hotels that are in downtown that have been people who have lost their cars their everything their visitors to the town. They had um they were bringing them out and they were setting them out on the bank because there was nowhere to take them. So I got to talking to people and found out that there were people there from all over the country who were visiting Asheville and had lost their vehicles, had no way of communicating with anybody, and they didn't know where to go. They were being set out, literally set out on the bank of the river where the flooding was. And so I'm like, well, listen, I'm staying up here at this Clarion Hotel. Let me go get my vehicle, and I'll start coming down and picking some of you up and taking you up to the Clarion, and at least you can get out of the elements because, you know, we can sleep on the hotel lobby floor if we have to, whatever, you know. So I started bringing people up to the hotel, and the gentleman there was, you know, giving them snacks and food and, you know, but it was the craziest thing, honestly, the craziest thing to experience that, you know, where literally people who were in charge of keeping you safe, like the policeman and the fireman, had no answer for what you needed to do because there was no way to get to a shelter if there was a shelter or there was no, you know, and I was astonished to find that they were setting people out who weren't even local people. They would know how to find their way to safety, basically. So I spent the evening pulling people up, getting off the boats and bringing them up to the hotel. And I did that all evening. And then later that night, finally, they'd stopped running boats for a while. And I made myself ready to go to sleep in my car. And I always keep blankets and pillows because I've been stuck on I-40 a few times for wrecks, like where I've ended up having to stay the night. So I always have the blankets and pillows in my car. So I made myself my bed, and I was ready to go to sleep, and the guy that manages the hotel came and knocked on my window, and he said, Priscilla, if you want to come in, he said, I can give you a room. He said, the bed's not been made. He said, it's dirty linens, dirty towels. He said, but if you can tolerate, he said, I'll give you clean sheets. And he said, and clean blankets. And if you at least have a place, if you want to take a shower, you need to go to the bathroom, you can go. And so he gave me a room that night and I stayed the night in the hotel and I made my bed and threw everybody else's dirty sheets off into the floor and I slept until probably about six o'clock in the morning. And then um I woke up and I heard traffic on the interstate and I was like ah they got the interstate back open so I was like yay I can get home. So I run out and get in my car and it's not even daylight yet and I take off going towards Black Mountain so that I can get home. And I get over there and

traffic still stopped. So we sit there. I sit there with, um, there was several people there at this point, um, you know, trying to get further east. And um, we're sitting there and sitting there and sitting there and it wasn't two or three hours and the highway patrol comes through and they're like, this is not going to be fixed anytime soon. You're, this mountain is closed for at least a few weeks. So then I was like okay now what do I do? Because the day before I couldn't take I-26 I couldn't take I-40 they were all flooded there was no other way of getting anywhere and you know back to my house there was no other route. And so I was like okay I'm going to drive back to Asheville and I'm gonna go back to the Clarion Hotel and stay so I head back into Asheville and on the way I was just like you know I'm gonna try I-26 and so I had to make a decision was I to going to go towards Johnson City and go on in to try to get back into Knoxville or was I going to go down to Spartanburg and try to get from Spartanburg up to Charlotte and get home that way. And then you know I had no phone signal I had no gps I had no nothing. Thankfully I had gas because that is when I realized that nobody had gas and that's why I was seeing all these cars on the side of the road. There was no gas anywhere and the few places that what did have gas were unlocked like they were um it was cash only. So you know most people now don't have cash, they live on a debit card and so thankfully I had gas. So when I got I thought I'm gonna try 26 so I headed towards I-26 I knew how to get there and I um take off and I as I get to where I had to make the decision am I going to Johnson City or am I going to Spartanburg I made the decision to go to Spartanburg and thank goodness I did because come to I had to make the decision, am I going to Johnson City or am I going to Spartanburg? I made the decision to go to Spartanburg. And thank goodness I did because come to find out, I didn't know this at the time, but the Johnson City I-26 was closed because they had lost some bridges. And I would have gotten way down the road there and not been able to have gotten back to Knoxville. So I took off towards Spartanburg and got down to Spartanburg all the way down there trees were down everywhere you could see where the the river was literally up to the interstate you could see where it had been over the interstate not to you know within the last few hours it had been over the interstate but it had so the interstate was covered in mud and they were trying to clean the mud off the interstate, and it was, it was a hot mess. But I got all the way down to Spartanburg, and there was no power all the way down to Spartanburg. I had no cell phone, no nothing, and my, I had been gone from my family's, like, my husband was, I didn't know this at the time, he was panicked, I absolutely panicked, but I had, you know, 24 hours, they had not talked to me, they didn't know where I was, or what I was doing, or what, you know, and I got all the way down to Spartanburg and I cut up 85 to go back into Charlotte so I could catch 40 and get home. And about the time that I reached I-40 is where, up in Charlotte, is where I finally got phone signal and was able to call my husband and let him know that I was okay. Well, I was able to get home and our house was okay. A lot of our neighbors, a lot of our good friends down here lost power for several weeks even. We were fortunate that we had power. And interestingly enough, when we got down, when I got here, some of our friends were here that lived in the mountains, had come down, had been able to get down the mountain from Spruce Pine and from Morganton because they had trees on their houses and stuff and were actually staying at our house when I got home.

Ginger Eggert: Wow.

Priscilla Dunn: So that was really cool.

Ginger Eggert: Yeah.

Priscilla Dunn: Then when I got you know once I got home and then I realized and I started really realizing like I got on social media and like nobody was saying anything from the mountains and I was like you know but I was hearing that it was really bad from people who had access to be able to tell that it was a really bad you know to say that it was really bad up there I was really really worried about my children. And the company that my sons work for, like two days later, had put out that they knew where, they had a list of who they knew was okay. And one of my sons was on the list, but one of my sons was on the missing list. And I was very, you know, very worried because there was no way to get up there at all. And it took me about a week before we were able to hear that one of the roads had been cleared enough. And interestingly enough, my brother was missing for a week, although I didn't know it. My brother was missing for a week. He was out cutting a road. He cut one of the main roads and allowed people to get into the mountains. He and a doctor, he had gone to work at Baxter's. And he met on the way. He was trying to find a way home. And he had gone up all these different roads trying to get home and he couldn't get home. And he found this doctor who was also trying to get home from the emergency department. The doctor happened to have chainsaws in the back of his vehicle. And they started cutting out the roads trying to get home. And he ended up being one of the people who was cutting out the road that I ended up finally getting to use to get to where my sons live. And when I finally got up there a week later and I was taking supplies and that kind of thing because I knew that they needed everything. When I got out there, I met my sons at the end of their road, and they had been cutting on their road for a week. And literally, they had just finished cutting the last tree off and had pushed, one of their neighbors had a tractor, and he had pushed the road just wide enough to get one vehicle down their road. And he had also managed to plug up a lot of the holes where the road was undercut and collapsed and that kind of thing. And so I was able to see my sons finally and know that they were okay. And so it was crazy.

Ginger Eggert: That's awesome that they helped in that way. That's awesome.

Priscilla Dunn: Yeah, they were out cutting the roads out because what do you do? But the power lines were down all the forest, like where my sons lived. There was some flooding and certainly, you know, an area. So it was certainly a lot of flooding. But the biggest issue they had was the tree, like all the forests around where they live, the trees were all, I mean, all of them are laying on the ground. It's the craziest thing to see. It's just the whole entire forest just laid over. And I don't know if you've been out a lot around Boone and seen that, but it's just the craziest thing to see all the trees down like that.

Ginger Eggert: Yes.

Priscilla Dunn: So they had more issues with wind than they did with flooding because of where their homes were. But yeah, crazy. I mean and you know up in Mitchell County they still do not have a grocery store they have a Walmart that's it their Ingles is gone you know a lot of the roads up there are still gone homes still gone there's still people living in tents people living in I ended up going up and volunteering quite a bit after the up in Burnsville I would go up and take loads of stuff up to my son's area of the community in Mitchell County and then I went on because Burnsville had a very well organized um group of volunteers that they had coming in and they and people were coming from all three counties Mitchell, Yancey, and Madison to get supplies and food and stuff so I did a lot with going up there and volunteering and um you know spending time you know making sure people had what they needed and or you know their bare

necessities I guess is what I should say and they um it was surprising to see how many people were living in like outbuildings like somebody's outbuilding that was astonishing to me I don't know how many people told me that that's where they were living within somebody's out you know their where they kept their lawnmower.

Ginger Eggert: How did that make you feel?

Priscilla Dunn: It it broke my heart for a lot of them you know it was really um you know but it's also a story of survival because people do what they have to do you know to survive and sometimes you do things that you never thought you were going to have to do you know and um and I was proud of them for their in you know ingenuity as far as like just been able to, you know, find some place to get out of the elements for a while, you know, and that, so, you know, we were giving out a whole, we gave out a whole lot of the little buddy heaters, you know, because it was winter's coming, and people were getting cold, and the mountains are cold, and, you know, and they were using them to heat a flipping shed, you know, that's not even insulated.

Ginger Eggert: Yes.

Priscilla Dunn: You know, and they were sleeping in mattresses. Sorry, not mattresses, but on sleeping bags, you know, and whatever they could find to survive. And you know, there's no food up there. There's no water. But interestingly enough, another thing I need to say. So down here in Hickory, you know, we really heavily organized down here in Hickory as well. And a lot of our supplies were flown up with helicopters from our airport. And for probably two months down here our grocery stores were completely empty like there was nothing on the shelves there was probably more food in Yancey and Mitchell County than there was in Catawba County there for a long time because people were taking everything they could buy and trucking it up the mountains to these people because they you know they didn't have anything. And um I would joke I'd be like I'm gonna go up here and get a gallon of milk or I would have to come up here. If I want a soda pop, I'd have to come up the mountains to find something because our grocery stores in Hickory had nothing on the shelves. There was no diapers. There was no formula. There was nothing. I mean, everything was gone. It was crazy. But you know, the response from, you know, the United States as a whole was, you know it's just people helping people you know and that's I guess what we do whenever we need to right you know.

Ginger Eggert: Yes.

Priscilla Dunn: Yeah.

Ginger Eggert: So you said like to kind of I mean you weren't preparing for the storm but you had gas and food but um what else like did you wish you had in preparations for the storm?

Priscilla Dunn: Oh um well I wish I had a way of communicating. I wish I had maybe a plan. You know like what do you do if you know and we've kind of done this since since this has happened because I've come to my husband you know he was worried to death about you know me being saved and I'm like you know you don't have to know that I'm an adventure girl this was a great adventure for me I mean in all the tragedy of it, it was just, it was a huge adventure for me, I got to get, do what I like to do in helping people, I got to, you know, be out in the elements, and, you know, see a historic event unfold, and how, you know. So I wish I had had, I wish I'd had a way of letting them know I was okay, and some kind of radio system that you know you could use whenever there's there's no cell phones you know because for the longest time too even up in the mountains even now I have quite a few friends up there that you know their internet is hit and miss and um one of my girlfriends, I didn't hear from her for like four or five

days last week, and I hear from her a lot. And her Internet was down, you know. It's still their internet, their services were rigged up super, super, super fast to try to get everybody back to having power and everybody back to having the internet and that kind of thing. But they weren't rigged well. Now they're having to go back and start trying to put infrastructure into place that is much more reliable. But that you know they so many people up there still don't have I mean even my mother does not have a landline at her house anymore and has you know we're in a year now and there's no landline to her house any longer and she lives right in town so when you think about you know the well my husband said you just got this and they still have grocery stores that haven't come back yeah the people up there are really you know missing their grocery stores and they're having to go to other places to get groceries and you know it's just yeah I wish I'd had a way to be able to communicate that everything was okay that I was safe I was okay and I was just trying to figure out how to get home and how to you know doing the best I could to get home.

Ginger Eggert: Yes. So have you experienced any other hurricanes before Helene?

Priscilla Dunn: Um yes so we you know it's quite quite often, the hurricanes will come through the mountains of Western North Carolina. In 2004, I think we had back-to-back hurricanes in Spruce Pine, North Carolina. And you know, there was certainly a lot of flooding from that. We also, in 1989, we experienced, what, Hugo. Um Hugo came through the mountains, you know, and it came through straight through the state of North Carolina. And by the time it got to the mountains, it was not nearly as vicious as it was, like, down around Hickory and Charlotte and in that area. But um yeah so we have but not not like helene was at all not at all.

Ginger Eggert: So, did you expect Helene to be as severe as it was?

Priscilla Dunn: No, no. You know, it's interesting because I always like to read up and watch, you know, in-depth weather reports and that kind of thing, and, you know, there were certainly warnings that it was going to be severe, but we have, you know they have said that before on certain storms you know not all of them that's like the one that's coming next week or this coming week you know they're saying it's going it could be it's going to be severe around the coast for sure but you know they're not giving like Helene type warnings for that hurricane for us in our area where you know. So I you know I was paying attention to it but I wasn't it's hard to envision that a storm can be that bad if you've not lived through it does that make sense like.

Ginger Eggert: Yes.

Priscilla Dunn: You know they can tell you that things can get really bad but if you've never experienced it it's hard to believe that it can get that bad you know that the power of water and the power of wind can be that significant. And so no I was not prepared for I was not prepared to see the trees all over the road and I was not prepared to for the um for where the storms to be for the storm to be like it was no.

Ginger Eggert: So did your car have any damages when you were driving?

Priscilla Dunn: Oh um no I um I have an SUV and thankfully it's a little it's a little jacked up and so um it it went fine and I didn't have any issues I didn't have any trees fall on top of my vehicle or anything like that. Because like I said, by the time I got up there, the wind had died down. I can't even say that it was, it might have been a little breezy, but not like the winds that had to have come through there to have toppled those trees like that. That was the craziest thing to see the trees just all over the interstate like that, you know. And the city was out trying their best to clean up and clear the roads. And you know, as quickly as the trees were falling, they were

trying to get them removed. And I was really impressed with how quickly Asheville was able to get their trees out of the way because it took a lot longer for other areas to do that. Asheville was on it immediately. So they must have been preparing for a much bigger storm. I was really surprised that they did not have an emergency emergency plan in place, just to be honest. I don't know what that would look like in the light of the storm. That's a once in a thousand year storm. But I'm just surprised that they were setting people out with nowhere for them to go. You know, that just... And then I was shocked when that fireman told me, I don't know where you go. He was like, I don't know where to tell you to go, you know, because I thought he would have for sure tell me there was a shelter, you know, 2.5 miles away from me or something.

Ginger Eggert: Exactly.

Priscilla Dunn: No, there was, I don't know what to tell you, ma'am, but this is, you know, there's nowhere for you to go. And, and I, you know, my thoughts were immediately to people who were not familiar with that area, you know, I was very fortunate to have, you know, lived my whole life in Western North Carolina, and I've always been, you know, in the cities and on the roads and I know I was just thankful that I had um that I had I was well acquainted with the options that I had.

Ginger Eggert: So I know you mentioned that you recorded videos on your phone. How were you able to use your phone and like did it die or anything?

Priscilla Dunn: So I had a I had well my phone was fully charged probably when I left my daughter's house and then I had a charger in my car so I was just able to you know I had full access to be able to video as I went and I wish I had videoed more had I realized the real scope of things like I didn't video coming up through the gorge you know because I never in a million years imagined that that I mean I don't know if you've been through there but the road was gone and and I didn't tell you this but I before I got to Asheville, I had talked to my husband, and the road had collapsed. It had collapsed not long after I came through there, and I thought in my small mind, I thought, oh, it's just collapsed in this one curve where I thought, oh, that river is probably undercutting this road as I'm driving 80 miles an hour over it. My thoughts were, this is getting undercut. I had no idea it was miles and miles of that road that's gone. I mean, completely gone. The whole entire two-lane interstate into North Carolina from Tennessee, gone. You know, for 10 miles. It's just, it was insanity. And I was on that road within the hour that it collapsed, you know. And when you think about that, oh, my word. So when my husband had called me and was like, the road's gone, and then I knew the highway patrol had told me that, you know, the Black Mountain had collapsed, I was, you know, I was like, holy cow and I do wish I had videoed the road as it um as I was coming up through there because I didn't think about I just did I was but at that point too I was trying to get beyond that dam. All I cared about was getting safely as quickly as I could out of that area.

Ginger Eggert: So what has it meant to you to survive through this?

Priscilla Dunn: Um well it's um certainly given me a um new respect for weather um I I'm a little nervous about this storm that's coming you know next week um I'm and I'm not normally an anxious or nervous person about stuff like that but um well i'm trying to remember what i was telling you um.

Ginger Eggert: Um I asked what has it meant to you to survive through this storm?

Priscilla Dunn: Yeah I think I was saying it was given this has given me a new um a um a real a real respect for um the um power of nature for sure and you know and and too to under to learn

you know the most valuable things in life aren't things you know a lot of people lost a lot of things in this storm and um a lot of people lost their lives in this storm and um how blessed I was that I was kept safe that you know it could just as easily have been me on that flipping road coming up there with the water licking the white line you know that could have taken the road right out from under my vehicle and you know. It's crazy it's just crazy you know it's crazy.

Ginger Eggert: Yes. So you mentioned a little bit about how you helped with the recovery process by you know getting supplies to people and your family was helping cutting trees. Was there anything else you did to help with the recovery process?

Priscilla Dunn: Well, you know, certainly a lot of things that came from Hickory, North Carolina came that went up the mountain, came through me, through different people that I knew who would bring supplies and you know and I probably did two to three trips a week for I don't know six weeks eight weeks um taking things up the mountain to different supply chains to drop them off to be able to um for people to have things that they needed. And um I um organized some uh some with the help of some other people, where we got books up the mountain for some of the schools that needed some things because several schools, Gooch Elementary School had lost everything, and they were a K-2 school, and they needed materials and things like that. I went and helped actually clean out people's properties, several of my friends who had gotten flooded. I went and an organization that my brother was involved with out of Charlotte. We would go up and we cleaned out mud. Oh, my word, it was awful. Mud everywhere out of a couple people that I knew's basements and, you know, downstairs. So we did some of that. I think what else I did in regards to. I think that's about the extent of it. I don't do as much now, although there's still, you know, I follow several people that are still on boots on the ground up there, you know, trying to still help Yancey County recover and Mitchell County recover from the storm.

Ginger Eggert: But that was a lot. That was a lot of help. That was really great.

Priscilla Dunn: Yeah, I was very fortunate. I'm very fortunate that I had the ability to do it and had people in my life that had resources and that kind of thing to help make those kind of things happen yeah.

Ginger Eggert: Yes. So what have you learned from your experience with Helene?

Priscilla Dunn: Um if they call for a the the chances of the storm being pretty severe I think that you definitely need to take heed. Um better safe than sorry. I also like don't know that I will travel like so this coming week you know the storm is coming in and i'm supposed to go to Knoxville to see my grandchildren and spend time with my daughter and take care of my grandkids and um you know I'm a little if it ends up being pretty bad I'm probably not gonna come back for a few more days because you know give the land time to figure itself out because um I don't know if you knew the road collapsed again and probably four or five months ago the road collapsed again on um I-40 down in the Gorge I happened to be coming through there again when that was happening and the rivers were coming off the mountain like it was insanity and I happened to just barely clear I mean within 10-15 minutes of when the road collapsed again. And I'm a little scared to get you know I don't want to be on that mountain again when it's raining just to be honest definitely yeah because that I think I thought that with Helene um that the that was a one-time thing but then coming back through there again and just seeing what rain did to the mountain. The landscape is different. You know this was a geological event and the land the landscape is different the the what we previously knew as the routes for rivers and creeks is not the same anymore and things are not safe like they you know like we would have thought they

would be. The fact that the rivers are coming off the mountains like they were um the last time that I came through that when it was really pouring the rain like that let me know that there's the whole infrastructure of our river systems in the mountains is completely rerouted itself and you know man has not had time to figure out all that yet and it's not safe. So I think um i'm I will definitely be more um like if we get a major storm this week, I won't have to think about staying a lot longer wherever I'm at and not taking any chances.

Ginger Eggert: So what steps have you taken to move forward after the hurricane?

Priscilla Dunn: Um I think I you know try to um talk to my grandchildren about how they're feeling about you know the hurricane that that was a big concern for me um about how they you know emotionally were handling it. So that's part of what I have done um part of it is just knowing that it it's helpful to know that people would take care of other people you know I think about this storm that's coming next week, and if it hits in Hickory, North Carolina, I have no doubt that the people who came to help the mountains of West North Carolina would be coming to help people in Hickory, North Carolina. It's good to know that there are networks of people that are helpers. And that gives me more peace of mind about storms. And even as politically divided as our country appears to be, and as derisive as, you know, all the situation is in a lot of ways. When it comes down to it, people are still going to help people, you know, and I think that's the big takeaway that I have from this is that, you know, people are going to try to help others.

Ginger Eggert: Yeah, I think it's good to know that you're not actually alone. Usually there's community and others to look to.

Priscilla Dunn: Yes, absolutely. Yes, yeah, absolutely.

Ginger Eggert: So is there anything else you would like to add or is there anything else you would like to share with the community?

Priscilla Dunn: I think I think that's it i'm very appreciative for all the people who came and helped the mountains of Western North Carolina and who continue to come up there and you know donate supplies to help people rebuild and you know because there's so many people who still are without homes and you know and housing is a great shortage up there already. Um and you know um i'm thankful for that that there's people who are doing that still. Um and I hope that you know that we are able to help the mountains recover beyond, you know, before anything else happens that, you know, could cause problems to their systems up there with, you know, the river systems being the way they are now. And, you know, I will say this. I went up there not long after, you know, probably three weeks after the hurricane. You know, I grew up in Yancey County, and my husband and I, we had a house on a place called Pensacola, and it was one of the harder-hit areas near Cattail. You'd go with Pensacola to get the Cattail area. And I decided to drive up just to kind of looky-loo, which I didn't feel like people should be doing per se. But I'm from that area, so I kind of felt like it gave me a little bit of grace. And also I was up there to bring, I brought a bunch of stuff up and I was like, I want to go see the area that I, our house used to be in. And when I got up there, I didn't know where I was. That's how different it was.

Ginger Eggert: Wow.

Priscilla Dunn: Like the road that I had lived on and had been on my entire 50 some years of life. I did not know where I was at. It was that drastic of a difference. Homes that used to be there were not there anymore the land the river hadn't completely moved the course of the river

was completely changed things were just mud and bridges were gone roads were gone but excuse me and I was shocked by that like and I hear people on there sometimes I'll watch people other people's videos now and they'll talk about that and I completely get that because that's how I felt I was shocked that I didn't know where I couldn't tell you what part were certain landmarks or that I thought where they should be were not there. You know, and that was interesting.

Ginger Eggert: It's crazy.

Priscilla Dunn: Yeah.

Ginger Eggert: Well, I just want to say thank you so much for your time and for sharing your story.

Priscilla Dunn: You're welcome.

Ginger Eggert: It was a pleasure speaking with you.

Priscilla Dunn: Yeah. Thank you very much. And I'll send you those videos.

Ginger Eggert: Yes, please.

Priscilla Dunn: I didn't send them did I? I hadn't sent anything to you.

Ginger Eggert: No.

Priscilla Dunn: I'll send those to you.

Ginger Eggert: Thank you very much.

Priscilla Dunn: You're welcome. All right, you take care.

Ginger Eggert: You take care too.

Priscilla Dunn: Bye.

Ginger Eggert: Bye-bye.