

**Interviewee: Rodriguez, Diana**

**Interview: August 17, 2006**

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON  
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Interview with: Diana Rodriguez**

**Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdes**

**Date: August 17, 2006**

**Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola**

EV: This is Ernesto Valdes interviewing Ms. Diana Rodriguez, the City of Houston Emergency Medical Services in her office, 500 Jefferson, 15<sup>th</sup> floor, Houston, Texas, 77002. The date is August 17, 2006. You know what this project is all about?

DR: Yes, we talked briefly. When I am long gone . . .

EV: When you are long gone, you'll be famous.

DR: Wow!

EV: You'll be the Ansel Adams of Katrina.

DR: Oh, I don't want to be remembered for that.

EV: Well, do you want to go over what you want to be remembered for?

DR: I want to be remembered for my art work and my paintings.

EV: There you go. Would you give me your full name, please?

DR: My name is Diana Jean (Perez) Rodriguez.

EV: Where were you born?

DR: Galveston, Texas.

EV: Do you mind telling us when?

DR: On August 5, 1960.

EV: What is your education?

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DR: I went to high school here in Houston and I took data processing then I went to U of H . . .and tried to work and go to U of H at night. My mother was 42 when she had me so it seemed like she was pretty elderly when I was very young. Anyway, she got sick and I didn't finish my bachelor's degree, but I went back a few times I tried to go back and in-between but I got married and had children. Long story short – I have an EMT certification after joining the fire department and being involved . . .

EV: Emergency medical training?

DR: Yes. Because, I have been here so long [City of Houston Emergency Medical Services] and I was involved in all of its activities and I said, well, I need to have something to justify that I know what I am saying. [or if I look at something and I think . . . for Dr. Persse – I felt like it was important so that is what I did.]

EV: Where did you get your EMT training?

DR: At HCC [Houston Community College]. That is where all our firefighters go through.

EV: Did you ever actually go out and work on the trucks?

DR: Yes, you have to do your clinical hours on the ambulance so I have done that. I have accompanied Dr. Persse and some of the other physicians on EMS calls and I've taken pictures for them, during scenes. I have taken pictures of fires. A few years ago, I won a first place photo award for an EMS picture nationally which features Dr. Persse at a cardiac arrest on Main street in downtown Houston.

EV: Who gave you the award?

DR: National Association of EMS Physicians.

EV: What were your work experiences before you came to work for the City?

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DR: Before I came to work for the City, I did my stint in an oil-based company, when the oil boom was so wonderful and then, I worked for a telecommunications company, which was right before the PCs became standard in everybody's home – teletype. It was computers but it was very primitive, eight-inch floppy disks, if you can remember that.

EV: Oh, yes.

DR: And then, I stayed at home awhile with my kids. I came to work for the city... for Dr. Pepe, who was our medical director way back then...I was hired by him when we worked over at Station 1, which is now the Aquarium Restaurant.

EV: What year did you come to work?

DR: 1992.

EV: And you were in this department since 1992?

DR: Yes.

EV: Are you in the same position now that you were during Katrina last year at this time, new positions or job titles?

DR: I think I may have gotten a promotion since then.

EV: So, what is your title now?

DR: Administrative Coordinator to Dr. Persse.

EV: So, what were you doing late August of last year before Katrina and you got the word, "We're going to do something."

DR: It was August 31 and that morning, Dr. Persse called me and said, "Get ready. When I swing by the office, I need to pick you up." We had done something very similar during Tropical Storm Allison when the hospital got set up over at Reliant Center. I don't know if you recall that.

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EV: Yes.

DR: During Allison we basically operated out of his car and I had my box of index cards, my phone book – we were mobile, nomads, and kind of putting out spot fires and making sure things were running smoothly. We were running to the VA [Veteran's Administrative Hospital, Houston, Texas] at the time. This time Dr. Persse told me, "We're going to be doing the same thing [as Tropical Storm Allison]." I was like, "O.K." Those days were long, but I knew pretty much what I was going to need to do. We had somebody here staffing the office but basically, I knew I was going to be very busy and everything was going to be spontaneous.

EV: Do you have like a kit or something that you have slides for that when you get called to an emergency, you grab that little kit and you . . .

DR: No. Dr. Persse has a city vehicle. He's got a jump bag. He's got all the equipment that he needs in there. I knew my job was not to be going out and doing patient care – it was mainly just to support him. He was going to be able to turn around and say, "I need so and so now," and I was going to need to be able to find a person for for him or do whatever it is he needed at that very moment.

EV: So, you don't have any waders or rubber boots or rain gear and all that stuff?

DR: No. We weren't prepared to do that. We just knew that planes were going to be coming in to Ellington and he said, "I am just going to need you with me." "O.K."

EV: So, your first thing was to meet the planes at Ellington?

DR: Yes. That evening is when the planes started arriving.

EV: Which planes were those?

DR: I think they were C141s but don't quote me on that. I don't know.

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EV: Were there any helicopters bringing folks in?

DR: I don't remember any choppers. It was these large military planes and we imagined the sickest of the patients were going to start coming in.

EV: Do you know where they set out from? I assume they were with ambulances at the Superdome and then they were taken to the airport out there?

DR: I have no idea.

EV: So, about what time did you get out to Ellington Field?

DR: It was in the late evening. It was already dark so it was probably around 9 o'clock at night. But all day prior to that, we had been at TranStar and the Houston Emergency Center (HEC) preparing for what was coming, and there were lots of meetings to go to and phone calls to make. Dr. Persse interacted with a lot of the local surrounding agencies. Some of them were large and small volunteer or rural agencies because he knew we were going to need to get their help to be able to take care of all of these people.

EV: So, you are talking about Cypress Wood . . .

DR: Cypress Creek and the like.

EV: Were you taking notes during all this time?

DR: I took some notes, yes.

EV: Your personal notes or for him?

DR: No, they were just kind of like personal notes because I needed to get reference names or because I knew one day later, he would say, "What is that guy's name that I talked to?" I have worked with him for over 10 years so I sort of know his routine.

EV: His alter ego. So, your assigned duty is basically just to be his assistant during all this time?

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DR: Yes.

EV: What was your work schedule during this time? Was there any?

DR: There was no work schedule and I knew that was coming. I basically prepared my family and I said, "I don't know how late I am going to be. Make sure that we've got food and water, whatever it is that we need." I made sure that somebody would pick up my youngest daughter from school. I called my ex-husband and said, "I need you to step up to the plate." So, that night, in fact, the first night at Ellington, I think I got home maybe at 1 or 2 in the morning and then next night was just as bad at the Astrodome.

EV: I take it you visited the Dome and all different places.

DR: Oh yes, right, even though the Reliant complex is basically a county facility our ambulances and our firefighters were actually the ones helping the people get off the buses.

EV: Is there any kind of record of about how many airplanes actually came in?

DR: I don't know. I may be able to get you that.

EV: Were you, at Ellington every day?

DR: No, we were there that first evening and Dr. Persse may have gone back once more.

EV: So, after that, what was your typical day? Let me reword that. Did you have a day where you would meet Dr. Persse and he would say, "O.K., we're going to go here, we're going to go there, we're going to go there?" Did you have daily rounds or was it all . . .

DR: It was just kind of ad lib because, well, the first day was definitely Ellington but we kind of prepared for that. Then, the next day, they opened up the Astrodome, so we

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went over there and we were there until like 2 or 3 in the morning - I don't remember – just making sure that the people that were coming off the buses were getting triaged, if they needed medical attention, they'd get it, if they needed to go to the hospital, we (Houston Fire Department members) would get them off the bus and triage and arrange transport for them. And so, after a while, the daily routine was to go to the Dome, then go to meetings. There were all these other entities trying to pull stuff together. It was kind of crazy. And then, you've got to remember – we had George R. Brown that opened up. So then, there were things to go to there. So, sometimes I would come here to our office and he would pick me up and you know, I'd just basically drive around with him wherever.

EV: How many other people in your office were involved – in your little niche? Was it just you and the doctor or did you have other people?

DR: Well, the other physicians that are here, they were staffing different areas, like there was one at George R. Brown and another one at Reliant and later at St Agnes, where they handed out the credit cards-- kind of overseeing a lot of the medical stuff.

EV: Did you have any daily debriefings or weekly . . .

DR: There were daily debriefings that I don't know if Dr. Persse told you about. The mayor had meetings, probably every day. I am not sure where I could look back and see where those were actually held. I know once they had the George R. Brown open, there was a daily meeting over there with the powers. . .

EV: What about within the department? Did that [the Mayor's meetings] suffice for you?

DR: No.

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EV: So you all's meetings were in the Dr. Persse's car on the way to work?

DR: Yes.

EV: So, when did you start snapping pictures of all this?

DR: Immediately. I knew once I met him at TranStar when they were preparing for the mass of humanity, it was kind of a given – I knew I had to have my camera.

EV: What camera did you use?

DR: I was using a digital Nikon at the time. There is another gentleman here who is a captain. He took a lot of pictures also but he was not feeling well and a lot of times he was handing me his camera. He's got an awesome \$1,000 camera that I used.

EV: What kind of camera was that?

DR: It was a Nikon D-70 (digital) with this big, huge monster lens.

EV: What was the name of the other photographer?

DR: Captain David Almaguer.

EV: Is there anything about setting up before you look at the photographs about your background position that I overlooked that you think should be included?

DR: No.

EV: Or that you would like to include?

DR: I want to credit Captain Almaguer for some of the photos. After a while we handed the camera back and forth. I am like the EMS resident artist/photographer and after I got that award, then everybody . . . they kind of pick on me. "Make sure she comes with the camera." I don't have any photography background, professional training, nothing. It is just that I have taken pictures all of my life. I have been told I

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have an “eye” for it. My brother taught me to use a 35 mm when he came home from Vietnam when I was 9 years old.

EV: What lasting impressions do you have personally of this? I mean, number one, when you walk in, I know you’ve seen a lot of tragedy.

DR: During the events associated with Katrina, I never saw any deaths. I saw people broken down, lots of wrinkled brows. Children that looked lost, even though they were next to their parents. The sick and elderly, apologetic, and grateful for anything the Houston people provided. .

EV: This has got to be pretty dramatic with that many people.

DR: Well, going to Ellington, we didn’t know what to expect, you know. It was like, “The planes are coming. The planes are coming.” And you are waiting and waiting, and you don’t know how sick these people are. You’ve only know what you’ve seen on TV, you know, at that point.

EV: So, even at that point you didn’t know what was coming [regarding illnesses]?

EV: No. No one knew what was coming. We just assumed there were going to be some very sick people, and you had all levels of people coming. Not all of them were that sick. I mean, some of them were elderly and some of them had chronic conditions, you know. Some of them needed to go to dialysis and were getting sicker by the moment. But you had, you know, a little old lady in a bed and you’ll see that picture. That was very striking. And yet, you are at Ellington, there is this big NASA plane in the background. That was so weird. Here you are in a plane hangar and you’ve got this little lady that is frail and that is getting attended to by everyone. It was just such a contrast of things and really, we didn’t know what else was going to happen. Were there any more

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storms coming? Are we (Houston) going to get hit? What would we do with these patients we just took in if that happens? There were just so many different things. When we went to the Dome, seeing the sea of humanity -- that was pretty amazing. That was, "Oh my God!" It would just hit you.

And you are walking into the floor of the Dome alongside of these other people that are victims, you know. I was trying to be very conscientious that they were tired, sick, depressed and some even angry. Some of them had mud up to their chest. There were little old ladies that -- I think about my own mother, and they would say, "Honey, don't get too close. I haven't had a shower in a few days." And they would be embarrassed and they would start crying and saying, "I'm so sorry. I've soiled myself." And you are like, "It is O.K. It is O.K." But their pride, everything was just right there, raw. And, you know, they were apologizing to you. And I just thought about gosh, that could be my mom or my aunt. Anyway, that was striking.

The children -- that was very striking because you think of your own children. Little kids that you could tell were wearing somebody else's T-shirt because that is what they got out with. And your heart just went out to them. We had Teddy bears up here that were donated for EMS victims. We took them to the Dome. . . you know, it is like, what could you do? You were putting a Band-Aid on a big, gaping hole.

EV: Was there any type of sense when you walked in . . . I am asking you this because somebody had said that they were struck... it could have been a different time than when you were there...but they were struck when they walked into the Dome and they heard silence. They were amazed that that many people and it could be so silent because they were just so exhausted. But apparently, by the time you got there . . .

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DR: Yes, it wasn't like the Dome you could ever remember. I have been to the Dome for sporting events. We had CPR training at the Dome on the ground floor of the Dome. This was just so unique and so different. Some of the pictures I think speak volumes. You had people that were just like wandering around and lost. You could tell they didn't know another soul in that place and they are just looking – their eyes are peeled. They are looking for somebody. They are walking around with signs, with tears in their eyes and desperation. Then there was the wall with all the little notes. "If you are a family member of Smith" . . . that was just amazing. I couldn't imagine how despaired I would feel, you know.

EV: Sometimes, when I walk into a place as immense as the Astrodome, the immensity has its own presence.

DR: Right.

EV: But then, when you have a tragedy or something like Katrina and you have all these people come in, the reverse happens, that is, the force of the tragedy can overpower the dominance of the place, in this case the Astrodome. . I mean, the scene overwhelms the place – even a football or baseball game doesn't do that - the game never dominated the presence of the Dome. Am I making sense?

DR: Yes.

EV: Now, in something like this, in my experiences – I can't be specific but I have had where they become the scene and the Astrodome simply falls into the background.

DR: Yes. You kind of forgot that you were in there because you just see the sea of humanity - and the cots. Each little section of the Dome had become people's homes. I was trying to be very respectful of that and not intrude, you know?

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EV: Did you ever notice a switch in the attitude, a tipping point of the atmosphere from despair to hope? Was there ever that type of transition there for you?

DR: Yes, I did see that because one night when we were at Reliant, they were trying to film a “welcome” message or something to let people know where the showers were, etc. The message was something like, “You are welcome here, we are going to try to help you.” We were moving from immediate healthcare emergencies to providing a little feel-good emotions.

I did the part in Spanish and I think another firefighter did the part in English. I don't even remember because it was like 2 or 3 in the morning. And I am like, “Oh my God, you want to film me now? Let me go put lipstick on! I don't want to frighten these folks!” (Laughter)

EV: And be sure to get my good side!

DR: Yes. Of course, it is 2 and 3 in the morning – my eyes are all puffy. You would hear a lot of negative stories. When people found out that I had been out there, they were like, “Oh my God, all those Katrina people.” And I have to say I did not experience anything negative. In fact, I kept running into people that if they knew you were with the fire department, if you had an HFD shirt on or your ID tag, they would say, “Oh, thank you. Ya'll are so wonderful.”

There is this one man that got off the bus and we were at the yellow lot just out in the parking lot, el vivo sol, you know? And they are coming off these buses – some of them were air-conditioned, some of them were school buses and it was hot as hell. And I remember this one man had a regular water bottle but the label was all torn off, you know. It was like he had been holding it for hours. And I said, “Sir, let me have your

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bottle of water and here, here is a fresh, cold, clean bottle of water.” And he said, “Oh no, ma’am,” and he about started crying. He said, “I will never, ever waste another drop of clean water again. This is precious.” He said, “I’ll take that bottle but you can’t have this other one.” And he got teary eyed on me. I was just like, O.K.

EV: So, those were your most impressionistic times?

DR: Yes, the people filled with gratitude, that would just kind of stop you and say, “I just want to say thank you,” or whatever. And I felt like, God, I didn’t even do anything compared to some of our firefighters. . . short of just saying, “Hey, there is clean water over here, or there are diapers over here for your baby.”

I took a picture of a baby . . . I asked this lady because, again, I was trying to be considerate not to make them feel like I am taking advantage of their situation and I am going to take pictures of you because I can. Do you know what I mean? And I asked this lady . . . she had a little bitty baby . . . I said, “Can I take a picture of your baby? It is such a precious little baby.” They had just gotten off a bus and it was hot. And she said, “Yes,” and she held it up for me and she smiled. And I said, “Oh, thank you. I just wanted to ask permission before I took pictures. It is a precious little baby.” She finally said, “It’s not my baby.” I said, “O.K.” And she said, “It’s my niece’s baby.” And I said, “Oh, O.K. So, where is the mom?” And that was like, oh my God. That opened up the flood gates and she said, “Well, I think she is here at the Astrodome and we are going to try to find her.” And I said, “Well, we are about to stick you on a bus and send you to the George R. Brown so don’t go anywhere, hold on.” I got a firefighter Captain and some other people and I said, “These people are about to get on a bus to go to George R. Brown and their family member is here in the Dome.” So, we got one of those little short

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Metro buses and got the family on that bus to send them over right down the street to the Astrodome. She said, “We got separated when the waters kept coming up. I got the baby and. . . we got split up. So, she hasn’t seen the baby in 2-3 days.” It was just like oh my God, I would just be crazy if I was separated from my baby.

EV: So, did she finally find them?

DR: All I know is I put them on the bus. I’ve got a picture of them – they are on the bus, they are just like happy and they are going to hopefully get reunited. I don’t know what happened. That bothers me. I imagine they got reunited. I want to believe they got reunited.

EV: When was a click from despair to hope?

DR: When was a click from despair to hope? Well, I don’t think . . . maybe I’m being too presumptuous or whatever but I think once we saw the people land, even at Ellington, it was like, O.K., they’re here – we can take care of them. I don’t think I felt . . . I never felt like it was despair. I always thought, well, we have just got to manage. We are going to manage. We are going to handle it. Dr. Persse is very well respected in the community. He’d make a phone call and things would start to happen. Now, as far as for the people that were coming in, I think they were just so damned relieved to get here and get off a bus when they had been on it for hours and hours. I am thinking that that was their sense of hope. “There is hope. I am landing on the ground now and it is not flooded. There is no mud. There is food.” I don’t know if that answers your question.

EV: That’s fine. It seems to me, and I am not trying to put words in your mouth or anything, but different people see it at different times – the people that I have talked to at

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this point. Some people saw it almost like turning a light off and on, and some didn't see it at all. I mean, it was such a long, gradual thing. There was no one point.

DR: Well, I think because of the nature of our business, it is – take care of the immediate problem.

EV: I was going to say that. It seems like because you all were, in essence, doing your job . . . you had people who were in a tragedy and you are there and everything is going to be O.K.

DR: Yes, we're going to handle it. There is no question. The Houston Fire Department is prepared to handle whatever. We are creative and we will come up with a solution.

EV: But other people who don't have that kind of training will see despair but they are in contact with them on a one-to-one basis for an extended period of time and can more easily detect the change. So they see something perhaps you don't see or hear. And your idea – you are like the Marines – you land, you're first responders, everything is going to be O.K. We're here.

DR: Yes, that's what I mean. I am not trying to be presumptuous.

EV: No, I'm not saying that. I am just trying to clarify without putting words in your mouth that the training for the fire folks is that – there is a fire out here and we are going to take care of it.

DR: Right. If there is somebody dying, we are going to try to save their life, rescue them.

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EV: Help is on the way.

DR: Yes, we are going to try to save their life.

EV: O.K. Is there anything you want to add to this narration part. We'll go over the photographs.

DR: Well, you know, I know there were a lot of negative stories in the media. Most of these people were full of gratitude. Some even managed to smile. People would say to me, "Oh my God, you were dealing with those Katrina people and they had that whole credit card thing." I never experienced anything negative – short of my flash went off one time when we were at the Dome and one guy got really visibly upset. And, do you know what? He had the right to be upset. He said something like, "Damn it. We just came from that hell and now we're going to become your story...." I don't remember exactly what he said...but he was very upset and he had a right to be. I felt very bad. That was the only time I felt bad. He felt that we were using them, using their image. After that, I was very careful with my camera and there were a lot of shots I didn't get because I said, "I am not going to turn the flash on." I was trying to be very respectful of their privacy and not make them feel like we were taking advantage of that situation.

EV: OK. Transcriber, this is the end of this interview

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## HOUSTON'S RESPONSE TO THE VICTIMS OF HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA

### AN INTERVIEW WITH

*Diana Jean Rodriguez*

Ms. Diana Rodriguez was interviewed in her office, City of Houston Emergency Medical Services, 15<sup>th</sup> Floor, 500 Jefferson, Houston, Texas 77002, on August 17, 2006. While most of the other interviewees in this collection were selected because they were in command echelons of the hurricane relief efforts, Ms. Rodriguez was selected because in her position as Administrative Coordinator to Dr. David Persse, Director, Houston Fire Department Emergency Medical Services, she was able to observe on an intimate level the aura of emotions that pervaded the various sites she visited. To history's great advantage, she took her camera and recorded the drama of the incomprehensible and unprecedented event known as Hurricane Katrina. Through her eye we see vignettes of the relief efforts, and through her words we hear and read not only the emotions she experienced, but also those of the bewildered, lost, confused, scared, and saddened people of New Orleans that Ms. Rodriguez encountered on a daily basis.

The interview was conducted by Ernesto Valdés, Center for Public History, University of Houston where the tape is deposited in M.D. Anderson Library on the main campus of the university.

