

**An Oral History**

**with**

**Ken Human**

**SSC History Project**

**Interviewer: Martin Oramous**

**2005**

# **Biography**

Ken Human is the Chief Counsel at Stennis Space Center. He was born September 27, 1951, in Waterbury, Connecticut to Clarkson B. Human, a cartographer and civil engineer and Grace Gillette, a nurse. He received his B.A. degree from George Washington University in 1973 and his J.D. from Franklin Pierce Law Center.

He was hired at the John C. Stennis Space Center as the General Attorney Advisor in June 1978 and from June 1984 to June 1986 he served as the Acting Chief Counsel in the protracted absence of the Chief Counsel. He became the NASA SSC Chief Counsel in June 1986.

Ken was awarded the NASA Exceptional Service Medal in March 1988.

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*This is an interview by the Stennis Space Center History Office. The purpose of this interview is to document the story of key personnel during/after Hurricane Katrina at SSC. The interview is with Ken Human and is taking place on November 29, 2005. The interviewer is Martin Oramous. Also present are Paul Foerman and Shelia Reed.*

**KEN HUMAN:** My name is Ken Human. I'm the Chief Counsel at Stennis Space Center. I first came to work here when I was 26 years old in 1978 which was nine years after Camille had struck the Gulf Coast. When I first moved down here, I used to hear a lot of stories for people who had survived that hurricane and stories about what had happened to the Coast and I guess I always wondered what it would be like and the result of Katrina, I had a first hand experience. I lived in Eden Isles, which is a subdivision in Slidell, LA. I had a waterfront property. A matter of fact I had a dock and a boathouse in my backyard. We've had several scares from hurricanes over the years. Most notably, Hurricane George in 1998 where the water rose about half way up my backyard. More recently, Hurricane Isadore and Lily a few years ago. Once again the water rose. My subdivision has been in existence since the 1960's and people said that is basically as high as the water has ever gotten. So, I really wasn't prepared for how high the water could get. My house was built in the year 2000 and the slab is at about 12 feet. When you look out at that level of 12 feet out my backyard at the water and the canals that lead to the lake, it's hard to imagine that the water could ever get that high but in fact there was about a 20 foot storm surge I'm told that inundated my subdivision with Hurricane Katrina.

The days before the storm, the Friday before the storm is very notable in my mind because that was the day of the Management leadership transition where I was informed that Bill Parsons would return to Stennis Space Center as the Director and replace Admiral Donaldson. Although I had a good working relationship with Admiral Donaldson I had a great relationship with Bill Parsons and I was very much looking forward to working with Bill again but I also felt sorry for Admiral Donaldson. He's an extremely nice man. I enjoyed working for him and I remember going up to his office Friday afternoon and we talked about the management transition but we had very little talk about the storm. Don Griffith had come down to my office earlier that day and made us aware of how Katrina was becoming more of a threat to our area. We did take some precautions of covering our computers but at that point it was more routine. It didn't

seem like it was that much of a threat to me as indeed it was. In fact, that weekend before the storm in my own personal life was kind of a transition weekend because that was the last weekend that my son Kenny was going to be living with us before he left for college and he was scheduled to fly out of New Orleans on Monday, the day of the storm to go off to the University of Michigan as a freshman. So we had planned all kinds of activities that weekend in terms of things we were doing with him. Taking him out to dinner Saturday night. A lot of those activities we ended up canceling but its kind of fun to think back on the fact that Saturday morning, he and his girlfriend had planned to come out to Slidell and we were going to go on a swamp tour on the East Pearl River. As it turned out, my wife and I debated whether we should do that Saturday morning because by that point the storm was really looming as a significant threat. But, because it was our last weekend with Kenny, we decided we would go ahead and do it. So, we took a swamp tour on the river and it turned out that river was pretty much Ground Zero for the hurricane. The eye of the storm came right up that East Pearl River but I remember thinking how beautiful the swamp was. I had taken that swamp tour maybe ten times in the past but I don't think I've ever taken it where the swamp was so beautiful and the wildlife was profuse all through the swamp. The swamp was very lush and green. It was just a beautiful day out there and of course anyone that had any sense was home taking precautions and getting their houses ready for the storm. But I was out there in the swamp taking a tour.

After we got back, I did take some precautions but I realize now that I was much more preoccupied with wind damage and the threat of the storm blowing out my windows than I was about a flood. My wife and I spent a good part of that day on Saturday putting storm shutters on our windows. As it turned out, I don't think there was a window in my whole subdivision that was blown out. We never worried about the flood which turned out to be the real impact of the storm in my home area. As it turned out, we changed Kenny's flight from Monday to Sunday. My wife Kim had never planned to come with me on that trip. So, Kenny and I ended up leaving on Sunday out of New Orleans airport and what turned out to be one of the last flights out of the airport. It was closed later that afternoon after we left and my wife evacuated separately with our friends Selma and Joda Lafayette. I spent a couple of days in Michigan helping my son get settled in his dormitory room and I flew back Wednesday night to Nashville which was the first leg of my trip back home. Of course by that point, the planes weren't flying into New Orleans anymore.

So, I got off the plane in Nashville and used my government credit card to rent a car and I drove straight to Huntsville. The Chief Counsel at Huntsville, Bill Hicks, ended up putting me up in his house. The next morning, Thursday morning, I went to work at Marshall. I really had no idea what had happened at Stennis. My last communications had been that Monday morning, the Monday of the storm; I had called my office from Michigan and talked to Margaret Roberts. Margaret was a Headquarters attorney who was serving a one year detail to Stennis at that time. She was living in a house in Pass Christian and she had decided to ride-out the storm at Stennis in our office. I must have talked to her about 6:30 in the morning and at that point there was rain and wind but she really didn't know what to expect because the T.V. had just gone out. She still had power.

The phone was still working and we talked for a while and I told her that according to the weather forecast I was seeing on T.V. that the storm was still a good ways south of her but that it looked like it was headed her way. I tried to call her back after that numerous times during the day but I was never able to get through to Stennis after that point. My plans were on Thursday at Marshall, I didn't know what conditions were like on the Coast but I thought maybe I would run the Legal Office from that remote location and I talked to Wendy Houser, another attorney in my office who had evacuated to Memphis, and she had agreed to come to Huntsville and was going to meet me there at Marshall. But I experienced a lot of frustration on Thursday just because I couldn't get through to Stennis. The only time I heard a voice from Stennis was at the EOC meeting which I attended at Marshall. That was the first report I'd heard that the Stennis facilities had survived largely in tact although there was some structural damage and it turns out some damage to B1100 where my office is located. As it turned out, really my office had suffered some very significant damage because the roof had blown off that part of the building. There had been a lot of water damage. Margaret had in fact had to evacuate all of the offices along the outside walls and had removed all the files and everything from those offices by herself and with the assistance of some other people that she found and basically piled everything into the library. The water had come through the ceiling and the ceiling tiles. So to this day, my office has remained uninhabitable but we hope to move back in some time early in the New Year. In fact, I have been running the Legal Office in a temporary location in the southern portion of B1100.

Anyways, on Thursday as the day progressed, I began to formulate a new plan which was instead of running the office remotely out of Marshall I was just going to go back to Stennis. One of my concerns at that point was the gasoline shortage which was prevalent in all of the southern part of the country. But never the less I went out to Wal-Mart and I bought some gas cans and I made a plan that I was going to drive back to Stennis Friday morning which in fact I did. I didn't really need the extra gas I brought along though. It was true that there was a gas shortage once I got South of Meridian. I went straight to Stennis. I found Stennis to be transformed from the way that I had left it. First of all there were over 3,000 evacuees that were living in the hallway. My office was destroyed and the people I ran into were in all kinds of various mental states. There were people who were just kind of sleep walking around that seemed very stunned. Then there were people who were highly energized to where they were like running from the end of the building to another doing all kinds of important things or so it seemed. Margaret by that point had already left and gone to Baton Rouge after riding the storm out here and spending a couple of days at Stennis. She had some relatives in Baton Rouge that she had gone to visit. I had met up with Wendy in Huntsville and her parents live in Huntsville. So she had decided to remain there but as I got back, I realized that I probably was going to need her because there seemed like there was a lot of legal work to do. Communications were really difficult. I remember that being one of the first things I noticed. As hard as it was in the outside world getting any reports about what was going on at Stennis, it was even worse when you got to Stennis trying to communicate with the outside world. As a matter of fact there was kind of a training course I went through about how to get an outside line. It was very difficult to get through to people in the outside world and of course all the cell networks were down. There was plenty of work to be done even though I didn't

have an office. I remember dealing with all kinds of interesting and unusual legal problems that mostly had to do with the presence of all the displaced people from the surrounding communities. There were issues involving abandoned kids and our responsibility to deal with people with special needs and how we were going to transition from being a shelter back to some kind of degree of normalcy. There was a just a myriad of different kinds of problems and issues that I became involved in.

Eventually, I made my way into Slidell and I was very curious about the condition of my house. By that point I had already seen the satellite photo of the roof so I knew that the house was still there and I was somewhat optimistic without good cause it turned out. It was quite a trip down Route 11 from the Interstate. I will never forget that trip seeing Slidell looking damage but largely in tact above Spanish Trail but once you got to the Southern part of the town below Spanish trail, in particularly as you progressed down Route 11 towards Eden Isles, the damage was really impressive and staggering. As I entered my subdivision there were just huge mounds of debris all over the place. The road had been altered. It was kind of a make shift route to get even into the subdivision. You became aware of this later, the muck that was over everything.

When I got to my house the muck seemed to be short of my house. My house looked largely in tact and fine from the outside. So I was very encouraged and optimistic when I removed the storm shutters and opened the front door only to find to my dismay that the house had flooded with about 2 ½ feet of water. Not only that, but left this layer of muck behind that smelled pretty much like sewage and because the house had been boarded up for four days at that point, the smell was really bad. There was a lot of mold and mildew growing. It was very staggering really. Looking at it, I was very depressed and I just didn't think I would be able to handle it. I remember driving around the subdivision and I ran into Rod Broule who was a retired NASA Safety Officer. He was living on his boat. He had already mucked all the muck out of his house. That was really incredulous. I said how did you do that? He showed me how he had done it. It was very encouraging. At that point I decided O.K. well if he can do it I can do it. I got all the essential tools and began to muck my house out gradually so that I'd spend a couple of hours at home everyday and put in an 8 hour day at work at least. At that point, I was just sleeping in Susan Dupuis's office, the Procurement Office. I guess I probably stayed in her office for about two weeks. I didn't know where she was or when she would come back but I slept on her floor. Eventually, I got a sleeping mattress, an air mattress and slept on that.

By this point, my wife told me that her company which had been headquartered in New Orleans, had setup temporary offices in Houston where they had always had a satellite operation. Her company is in the oil and gas business which has been gravitating from New Orleans to Houston for about 20 years now. So, right from the start she was worried they weren't going to come back and sure enough within a few weeks the company made a corporate decision that they were moving permanently to Houston. They treated their employees very well. They found them temporary residences and gave them a generous bonus but never the less she's been living in Houston ever since the storm because that's where her company has moved. She loves her job just as much as I love mine. We both need our jobs because Kenny's in college in Michigan so we are just making do right

now trying to figure out where we go from here. I've been engaged since then in the process of trying to rebuild the house which is going very slow. Today is three months to the day from the day Katrina struck and all I've gotten done really in terms of really significant progress if you came to see my house was that I have completely gutted the first floor and removed all the contents. Since then the debris removal people have been by twice and removed all that stuff from my front yard and I've actually got sheet rock hung up in my house but I haven't got my house taped and floated yet. I've also got some electrical work done. So, I've made some progress. But in terms of three months it seems like kind of slow.

Stennis, when I first arrived here seemed almost like an Oasis in a sense that it was probably the only place within maybe 100 miles that was functioning in terms of running water and power. The power came on relatively soon after the storm. It provided quite a comfortable existence to the point where it is probably kind of difficult for the displaced people to leave and go back to the surrounding communities because certainly we were a lot better off here than they were out there and in fact to this day, Stennis has continued to progress to the point where I feel it is almost normal when I come to work out here compared to going back into my community where my subdivision just swarms with contractors during the day but at night there is very few people living there. It's very dark. It's almost kind of scary to drive back in there. Right now, I guessed I lived in Susan Dupuis's office for about two weeks and then eventually I moved into an office in B1210 and lived there for maybe another 3 or 4 weeks. Then I found a house in Slidell where I could stay for a short while. I stayed there for a week or two. Now I am living back in my house on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor and I have these great big sheets of plastic that insulate me from the rest of the house. I've got power and the air-conditioner is back on. I'm fairly comfortable living there except not having a kitchen so I have to eat out a lot. That's my story basically up until now. Do you have any questions?

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** What would you say were the most difficult things to face when you came back? Gasoline, communications or just having to deal with everybody else?

**KEN HUMAN:** I think the personal low point for me was being on my hands and knees on the floor of my house and using a windshield wiper to muck all this muck onto a dust pan and then empty the dust pan into the garbage pail. At the same time you are almost choking or gagging from the horrible smell. My father-in-law came down to help me for a phase of that. He was teasing me that now I had the experience that would qualify me for a 2<sup>nd</sup> occupation. I could work in a sewage plant. That's pretty much the way I felt. So that was pretty miserable. But at the same time, there's been a certain resiliency among the population which I felt also. Once I got through that experience, there was kind of a triumph in having overcoming your fears and the noxious fumes and all that. Having been through all that, I'm kind of going a sequitious way to answer your question by telling you about some of the really high points. One of which was the day the Cypress House reopened. We had kind of a party down there in the woods. Of course, there were hundreds of trees that had come down in that area and made this great big pile of debris from all the trees that had fallen down. There were people grilling and basically what they were grilling was all the stuff that had come out of their freezers. There was no power at

that point in their homes. So, they are bringing all this stuff in and there was fish and sausage and all kinds of things they were grilling but what I really remember was the spirit of these people. It was like we were all bonded by the survival experience. There was just no doubt that these were all people that were native to this area that were going to come back with this resiliency that you couldn't keep people down that everybody was coming back. It was kind of infectious. I've lived in this area for 27 years now and I can't imagine living anywhere else. It was really pretty uplifting to feel that feeling which I've felt a lot since then. Yea, it's been hard dealing with a lot of people. Everybody is taking this different ways. It's like 1 out of every 4 people or maybe it's even more out of the site population ended up with a house that was uninhabitable but everybody has seemed to have taken it differently. I guess I've learned to give people a lot of slack and to realize that people are coping with this in different ways. When I first came down here in 1978, there weren't a lot of visible scars. So in my mind, it seemed like most of the damage to the facilities and structures that had occurred from Camille in 1969 had been largely restored. So that was kind of a metric to me that well people rebuilt in about 10 years and you could hardly tell the difference. But someone else, my friend Doug McLaughlin said to me, well Kenny you are missing the real point. The real impact of the hurricane wasn't the damage to the structures, it was mental. All the profound, catastrophic destruction to people's lives. It's all the people that lose jobs and all the people that are displaced and all the people that leave and never come back. It's all the difficulties people have. Even if you haven't had damage to your house, just dealing with the situation in your communities where there has been just such a profound loss of infrastructure. I thought that was a pretty significant comment I've made.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** It changed overnight....

**KEN HUMAN:** Of course in my own life, just being separated from my wife suddenly unexpectedly. Who ever thought at this point in my life that I'd be living on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of my house in my son's room while my wife is living in Houston?

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** How would you characterize the efforts here at Stennis? When you got back and actually started doing your work here, there were an amazing number of people around the country here, different government agencies, all working towards recovery.

**KEN HUMAN:** Yea, it's kind of interesting in terms of contrasting what it's like here and what it was like with what is was like being a displaced person in Michigan. I remember it was either the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> day after the storm, everyone all over the world so those images of the looters in New Orleans and Canal Street. It's just such a terrible thought that when people are down, people are trying to take advantage of you. But coming back here and actually living here, it's just a whole different experience where the good far out ways the bad. I mean there is just so many wonderful people all over the world that are trying to help. Everybody I've ever known practically since grade school or high school has tried to contact me and I've hardly had time since the three months to catch up with all those people. But they all tried to reach out to me in one way or another. In the same way, every branch of NASA reached out to Stennis. Every center made an



effort to help us. It's really a wonderful feeling. I guess it is a little humbling too. It's very difficult. I consider myself pretty well off economically and everything and yet I was in a situation where I just didn't know what was going to happen to me financially. Three months later I still haven't gotten anything from my insurance company. I didn't have any clothes 4 days after the storm except what I had brought with me to Michigan. Most of my clothes in house were flooded and lost. So, I started walking around at one point realizing I don't have any socks, any ties... *laughter*. People started offering me clothes. It's funny, because everybody wants to help you and I kept saying to myself I don't need help. I'm doing fine. I'm not as bad off as a lot of other people but then you realize it is almost therapeutic for the other people if they can help you and they want to help you so bad. You end up realizing that it's good to accept some acts of generosity from other people and that people really want to and need to help you. It's been wonderful to see that. All the acts of altruism and kindness and generosity that I've seen are just amazing and really completely outweigh and displace the bad images that probably a lot of people in the outside world have in terms of their perception of what happened.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** I know you have gotten a lot of calls from people, relatives or friends or who work with you in other parts of the country. Do they ever just ask you if things are back to normal now? What do you say to them?

**KEN HUMAN:** It's funny. Two weeks after the storm. I was scheduled to go to New York City. This was a trip that had been planned some time ago where I was going to present at the Office of Government Ethics Conference. A week before I was due to make the trip, I started thinking about it. Am I really going to go to New York City? Barbara Marino with IDI was supposed to be helping me with my presentation. I had a heck of a time trying to find out where she was and whether she still wanted to make the trip and she was game. So we went. It was really amazing going from a disaster area to 42<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway in Manhattan and checking into a hotel where they want to know if you want a king size bed or a queen size bed. I was like you have running water. What do I care? People in New York City of course, they were very aware that the hurricane had had the catastrophic effect on New Orleans and to much lesser extent they were aware of the damage in Mississippi but they were very sympathetic. Then, in my forays into the outside world, after that I noticed each time that there was less and less interest in Katrina and its after effects. People had begun to just assume that things were back to normal. In fact, the world had gone through five or six other disasters since then, including the terrible earthquake in Pakistan. People were very much diverted on to the latest crisis and catastrophe somewhere else in the world. I think as the days go by, people think less and less about Katrina and this area and just assume that things have come back to normal.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Do you have any inkling when things might be back to normal for you? Will they ever be?

**KEN HUMAN:** Well, I think that one thing that I noticed when I came back, everyone was very pessimistic. You heard all these dire predictions. For instance, in terms of the flooding in New Orleans that it was going to take a year to get rid of the flood water. Of

course that happened a lot sooner. You heard all these predictions that parts of the areas were going to be uninhabitable and I think a lot of that has been debunked. Even in my own community in Slidell, I think I heard some high official say something in effect it would be 6 months until the power came back on and of course it was back in a month or so. So, you know I think there's a tendency in the immediate aftermath of a disaster of this magnitude to think very pessimistically but in fact it's really been amazing how fast things have come back particularly compared to the predictions. I think I will be moving back into my office some time in 2006 which will be wonderful. Basically, our legal office has been functioning without any of our books or files or any of the resources we are used to using. We were cut off from all of that. There's a big sign on the old Legal Office door, "Micro-bacterial Contamination, Do Not Enter". We have 30 years worth of files that we are cut off from. In my house, at first it just seemed like an impossible task of rebuilding it but since then, I've hooked up with a lot of good contractors and I realized that I think my house will be largely coming back together early in 2006 also. I wouldn't be surprised maybe it's May before it's totally done. I think by May, my house should be back together. I expect to be back in my office. I'm a lot better off than most people in that regard. I think that for me, I will be able to get back to a fairly normal life fairly soon in terms of the facility. Of course, once again the questions about what's going to happen to my family and will Kim stay in Houston, will I stay here, will we still be able to afford the University of Michigan? How much will I get from my Insurance Company? All of these are unknown questions that I can't answer and time will tell if we are progressive.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** I've only got one more question. When is the last time you had to worry about where your next pair of socks will come from?

**KEN HUMAN:** *Laughter...* it's been a while.

**PAUL FOERMAN:** You stated you have all of these files in your old office you can't access. How are you able to do your job without all those files?

**KEN HUMAN:** We've made out pretty good. First of all, I have a tremendous crew right now. Wendy Houser and Margaret Roberts are two of the best attorneys that I've ever worked with. It's just been a joy and a pleasure to go through this experience with them. As terrible as it has been, we've kind of bonded as an office. All of us lost our homes. Christina Still was with us at the beginning of that period also as a temp attorney. She lost her home too. So, really 4 out of the 5 of us, everyone except Diane Sims, lost their home. We have just made the best of things. It's been difficult for lawyers to work without their files and without their books but they're a pretty smart crew. The people I've got working with me. I've been amazed at what good high quality work they've been capable of since the storm. I don't think we've really missed a beat.

**PAUL FOERMAN:** *Inaudible.*

**KEN HUMAN:** Well, even after I moved out of Stennis and stopped living in a shelter out here, I was still depending on Stennis for my meals since I didn't have a kitchen. I've

been eating out here at Stennis much more than I ever did before. It's hard kind of balancing all the requirements of my home life with all the requirements of work. It would be easy to stay at home and just work 12 or 14 hours a day and you will still have plenty left to do when you went to sleep at night but I've reached a point where I realize you know that I just have to kind of portion out my time and do a little bit at home in the morning and then come to work and then do a little bit when I go back. It is great coming to work and working with the people I work with. It's been a real source of pleasure and satisfaction for me throughout this whole experience, throughout this 3 month period. I just try to do as much as I can at home.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Is there anything you can think of that we may have missed?

**KEN HUMAN:** I guess I kind of started out talking about the leadership transition. Bill Parsons has been a big part in this whole recovery here at Stennis. He has just done a tremendous job. Yesterday, we had the farewell or going away ceremony for Admiral Donaldson. He worked really hard in that 1<sup>st</sup> week along with David Throckmorton and all of them deserve a lot of credit. It was a great time for Stennis in terms of having such a high quality of leadership at the top. I've worked here for such a long time. I know a lot of people at Stennis. I've made a lot of new friends since the storm. All of us who have been through this experience share some kind of common bond. When I am walking down the hallway and I see people that were here 4 days after the storm and they see me, we have a certain kind of eye contact that we never had before.

The woman who cleans my office, Bobbie, we were always friendly before the storm, but now when we see each other in the hall we hug. There's a lot of people like that. The storm has made our families and our relationships all the more important to us. That's been one good effect.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** No matter where you go, that's still what people talk about.

**KEN HUMAN:** Yes, that's right.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** That's good.

**KEN HUMAN:** Thank you.

*(End of Interview)*