

Excerpt from Oral History Interview with Blenda Wilson

Susan Resnik conducted this interview on June 12, 2013, as part of the CSUN Leaders Oral History Project. In it, Dr. Wilson discusses her tenure as president of California State University, Northridge from 1992 to 1999. In this clip, she describes how she found out about the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, her return to campus, and her first impressions of the damage.

Transcript:

SR: Tell me your remembrance of the earthquake, and what happened, and what you did, and where you were, and how it unfolded.

BW: It was January 17, 1994, 4:31 a.m., and my husband and I were in what we called our mountain house. We had a cabin just south of Bakersfield. It was called Pine Mountain Club, and we had gone there for the weekend, fortunately—very, very fortunately. And fortunately, in terms of Los Angeles and Northridge and the surrounding community. That hour of the morning the shopping center wasn't open, it was [winter] break on campus, so that we didn't have all students in residence, or faculty, or anyone else. If you're going to have one of those things, do it when it's not hugely dangerous because of a lot of people being in places where they would have inevitably been hurt—hurt badly. I woke up and felt ... whatever. This is about an hour and twenty minutes north of Northridge. It was felt all the way up to Big Bear and below. I did like this to my husband, "What's that?!" "Oh, it's an earthquake. It's probably Big Bear." He went back to sleep, which he can do in an instant. And like twenty minutes later our phone rang. The people who knew we were up in the mountains were our best friends in Atlanta and my brother in New Jersey. Our best friends in Atlanta were calling to say, "You've got to get up and look at the television, see what's happening with Northridge." "What's happening with Northridge?" "An earthquake!" "No!!! No. No." So we got up, and like everyone else, got glued to the television. And to be able to see the familiar things of your campus, the science building burning, the library falling apart, the parking structure flattened. I don't know how long it took me to get articulate and dressed that morning. Anyway, I couldn't get into Northridge, but I could get into Long Beach, so I called Chancellor Munitz and said, "I have to find a way to get to the campus." The north-south road that we took to the mountain was broken. And actually, Route 10, which was the east-west road, was also broken. So we went up to Bakersfield, north, got a helicopter from Bakersfield, to bring me down to Long Beach, rented a car, and drove up north to the campus. And I'll tell you, there are lots of vivid things, but I came up Nordhoff and faced the parking structure as I was coming onto the campus, and it was flat. I lost control of my limbs. I pulled the car over and was just like this. "Because," I thought, "if that's the way the entire campus looks, this has got to be hopeless, hopeless. But everything wasn't destroyed, everything was just kind of damaged—if that makes a difference!