

Krista Tonne

Diana: Okay, today is March 1st, 2018. What is your name?

Krista: Krista Tonne.

Diana: And where do you live?

Krista: 1222 CR30 Ashland.

Diana: So where is that from Ashland?

Krista: That is on old 31, about three miles east and half a mile north of Old Highway 34. Not the north-south road, but the one that goes to Protection.

Diana: So when did you first become aware the Starbuck Fire? Oh, I was going to ask you what is your occupation?

Krista: Oh housewife.

Diana: When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as "the fire."

Krista: It was that afternoon. This was the day after Arden's birthday, so I will remember it forever. But I was going to town and I saw it in the distance because I come in from the east. It looked really cloudy or something and as I got closer, I felt like it was smoke. I went to the post office and did my thing and I heard something about evacuating Ashland. So I asked the postmistress there, "Are they going to evacuate Ashland?" And she said, "Yes, the fire is just south and west of here." It was at that point I realized I needed to go to my mom and dad's house and help them evacuate because they're both over 80.

Diana: So when you went to their house, where did you suggest that they evacuate to?

Krista: We didn't know at the time. We talked about it and talked about what we might do. So I said, "Well, let's call the sheriff's office." So we called the sheriff's office and they said, "Yes, we are going to evacuate. Y'all need to go to Coldwater." So we got a few things together. My mom decided she wanted to drive their little pickup and have my dad ride with me. My dad is 83 now and he has Alzheimer's. But she wanted him to ride with me in our car and we started to take off and I said, "Do you want to get your cat?" She has an old cat. She said, "No." We looked outside and the wind shifted from the north. She said, "I don't think it's going to hit. So let's just go to the cemetery and watch it."

So we went out to the cemetery to see what the fire was going to do, if it was going to go ahead and come or not.

Diana: Did you notice fire from the north then?

Krista: No, we sat up at the cemetery for maybe 10 minutes or so and the wind really looked like it was blowing the smoke to the south. Mom said, "Let's just wait. Wait a minute longer." She said, "If it starts coming back this way, we'll go." So we waited out there and one of the United guys from United Telecom was in his truck out there.

He came out and he said, "What are you all doing?" And we said, "Well, we were just watching the fire." And he said, "Well, you should probably be aware that there is one to the north." We looked north and it was just black. I said, "Mom, we're getting out of here. We don't have time to go back for the cat. We're just gone." So we headed out to Coldwater then and that turned out to be kind of a drive-through hell.

Diana: So when you were going east to Coldwater, did you run into any smoke or fire?

Krista: Oh my yes. It was horrible almost the whole way. It was just black. I couldn't see in front of me farther than the car ahead of me.

Diana: Was there somebody in front of you?

Krista: There was still a line. I caught up to the line of people that were heading out and we passed Protection just about the time they were evacuating because they were turning into traffic. Quite honestly, if the person ahead of me had gone into the ditch, I would have just followed because I couldn't see anything. In places, there was fire on either side but it was just black until we got just a mile or two up that road that goes north into Coldwater.

Diana: So did you stay in Coldwater?

Krista: We went to a friend's house, Chris and Katelyn Johnson. We know her as Katelyn Neier. We had called ahead and asked if we could stay and they said yes, to come on. So we went there. Meanwhile, I called Arden, my husband, to let him know what was going on because he was at our house. For some reason that day, he was home early and he was at our house when I left. He didn't know all of this was going on until I called him. And I said, "I'm with Mom and Dad." I said, "I'll be coming home soon." And he said, "Okay, just be careful. Life is good. I think it will miss us."

About 20 minutes later he calls and says, "I have the critters packed." He said, "I'm coming to Coldwater. The barn caught fire and it caught my shed on fire. We're going to lose everything." And he hung up. So we waited and 20 minutes later he was still not there, which is about how long it usually takes us to get to Coldwater. Forty minutes later he was not there. I was texting him, no answer. I called him, no answer. I called him several times and no answer. I was starting to panic. He finally calls me back and he says, "I think I can save the house." I looked at Chris and I was just horrified. Chris said, "We can't let him do this alone." And so Chris took me to our house and that was another drive through horrible fire and smoke. The dirt road that goes from Coldwater to the road that goes to Protection. I don't know what they call it, anyway, on that road it wasn't so bad but after we turned to go north into Clark County it was... I have a couple of pictures.

Diana: Was it dark?

Krista: It was by that time.

Diana: Like 6:30?

Krista: 6:30 ish. I'm not even sure what really that happened after that call. It was just kind of a blur but we happened to see Steve Stevens sitting at the side of the road and we stopped to see if we could help him. And he said, "No, I'm just watching my house burn." Because at that time he thought his house was burning, but it was the old house. So we went on and we got there, Arden just had a garden hose. There were just flames everywhere. Our house was still okay but he was trying to work on the north side of it, which was being scorched and it wasn't so much from flames as it was just the heat of his workshop. It was just that hot.

Diana: What kind of like grass and trees do you have around your homestead?

Krista: Well, the thing that killed us was we had a tree row to the north of us.

Diana: Is it really close?

Krista: It was, it's probably like 100 yards maybe, like a football field away, and that's what had happened. It caught on fire from that north fire and the wind had blown the sparks on top of all of our buildings. The fire did not catch us from the ground up; it was from sparks from the trees and the tree row that caught

everything on fire.

Diana: So the barn, the shop, did you have a garage?

Krista: We had my grandma and grandpa's old house and garage.

Diana: The Vallentine house?

Krista: The house that we raised our kids in. It was in total flames, I have a picture of that one, too. It was in total flames when I got there. The barn, we lost the barn and we had two barns out there, well, a barn and an old shed. We lost our granary. Of course, the tree row, we lost that. There was another old shed out there that was pretty well gone and it burned too. Basically, we lost everything except our house.

Diana: Did you lose equipment?

Krista: No, we didn't lose... Most of the equipment was old stuff. We didn't lose our good tractor because it was right there on the west side of our house, the new house which didn't get burned. Also, our old tractor, or older tractor, was there but we lost several trailers and stuff like that. We lost a gasoline tank, which that was a miracle because we had one tank that was filled with gas. There were two tanks sitting there; the one that burned down was the one that was not full and the other one survived without blowing up. It was just amazing. Our propane tank, there was just a ring around it that was not touched by fire. There was charred grass on all the way around it. The propane tank itself was not harmed.

Diana: So did this burn all night?

Krista: Yes.

Diana: So you stayed out there and watched everything. What about Arden's tools?

Krista: A lot of his tools that he uses on his daily construction things were okay because they were in his pickup. He has toolboxes that he keeps with him, so a lot of those were saved. But a lot of his big things like his lathe, his drill press, the big air compressor, a lot of the big items, a lot of items that he had gotten from Lonnie Carter when he worked for him. The big items were damaged beyond repair and the smaller things were all just melted into little lumps of nothing.

Diana: So when the sun came up, what did everything look like? Did you have lots of people stop by and try to help?

Krista: No.

Diana: Did you see anybody come by?

Krista: Katelyn had called 911 for us, because her husband at that point was out there, too. One of the Ashland officers, I can't even remember who it was, again like I said some of that is just a blur. They came out and said, "We're sorry. We just don't have anybody else. Everybody is fighting somewhere." And that was the only person that came out because at that time everyone was in other places. You know, there was just no one left.

Diana: So did you also lose fence and pasture?

Krista: Oh yes.

Diana: Did you lose cattle?

Krista: We did not have cattle.

Diana: So just the pasture.

Krista: Mom and Dad lost some, we lost the corner of our wheat field, the wheat, even though it was green, it burned because it was so hot. But actually, just a corner of it burned.

Diana: Did you have smoke damage to your house?

Krista: We did not.

Diana: Did you have to have it cleaned?

Krista: I did my own cleaning, it was more... There was a lot of ash mostly the next day because you know the next day was windy as well. We came home, well, we went to church that Sunday. When we came home there were whirlwinds. There were like three of them and they were just blowing ash up into the sky. So for weeks afterward, I was cleaning ash.

Diana: Did you have electricity?

Krista: Praise God, we did.

Diana: At your house?

Krista: That was another one of those miracles, there were so many miracles. I just saw the hand of God's protection over us. It was amazing. Where the electricity is, the pole was out there next to the tree row that burned and it did not burn down. We had electricity until the next morning; we could not have run the water without it. Well, we might have been able to get our generator started, but that was just amazing, that we had that.

Diana: So you had electricity and water so you could actually...

Krista: Squirt. The only thing we had was that one hose because all of our water hydrants were by buildings that were in flames. So we could not use them. So he went in and hooked it up to the hot water heater because it has a drain. So we used hot water to save our house!

Diana: But it worked. So when did you return to Coldwater to get your parents or did they make their own way home?

Krista: Since mom had the pickup, they stayed overnight with them. And then the next morning, Mom said, "Don't worry, we'll make it home okay." She said, "The roads are good and it's clear." So they drove home. My mom was okay with driving home.

Diana: So did you spend a lot of the next couple weeks cleaning up around your place?

Krista: Yeah. We had a crew of townspeople and people Arden had worked with and family come out and help us.

Diana: Did they come on Tuesday or Wednesday?

Krista: You know, I can't tell you what days they came. It may have been Tuesday or Wednesday, somewhere in there, somewhere during that week because they came out a couple of days. They got the place where the old house had been scooped up and they got a lot of the tin and stuff moved out. We had an old silage pit that we used as a kind of a dump that we're trying to fill in. Russ Hensley brought his little machine and helped us there and the Reimer boys brought their truck for us to haul things. Kayla came home that week and Tanner Lacy, a very dear friend, came as well.

Diana: What's your most vivid memory of the fire?

Krista: I think when I watched my grandma's house burn down, although that moment when I didn't know where Arden was, that was a tough thing. I was terrified.

Diana: Until he called you back?

Krista: Until I finally heard from him. That was awful.

Diana: Where was Faith?

Krista: Faith was at college at the time, so she was texting me and all of that. She chose not to come home until summer, so she didn't see it until things had greened back up. Which I don't blame her. It was a hard thing.

Diana: You've lived out in this country for a long time now and you've seen grass fires. Out that way, you've probably seen controlled burns or where they set fire or something. Did what you saw compare to any of those?

Krista: It was worse than any of those, even though there is the one that came up really close. I can't even remember what year that was, that came up really close to Harden's place to the south. It kind of hit out there in the hills more. That was from a cigarette; somebody had tossed a cigarette. But even that had no comparison to this one because when I looked out, there was nowhere that you could look that there wasn't fire. I could see fire almost to Bucklin. It was just all around us. There was no direction that I could look that there wasn't fire.

Diana: So had you ever seen houses on fire before or buildings like that?

Krista: I had lived in cities and stuff before, so I had seen it, but I've never seen it burn my own house.

Diana: Were you able to get anything out of any of the buildings?

Krista: No. When they went, they just went like... Well, they were old. They just went like wildfire, literally.

Diana: Did they explode?

Krista: There were no explosions when I was there. I don't know if anything exploded when my husband was trying to put stuff out. Like I said, the propane tank wasn't damaged.

Diana: So the trees, the tree row was already on fire when you got there?

Krista: Oh yeah.

Diana: So you didn't hear any of the trees exploding?

Krista: No, as a matter of fact, some of the ones closer to the house and stuff were still flaming, but you know even a lot of them were mostly... It was up high in the branches that they were burning.

Diana: Was the wind blowing really hard?

Krista: It was horrible.

Diana: Had the temperature changed? Was it very cold?

Krista: It wasn't really cold. It was cold enough by the time I got out there to help Arden that I wanted a jacket, depending on where I was standing because sometimes if you were standing downwind of the heat it was too hot. I tried to haul water out and save our old wheat truck, which I managed to do because there wasn't much we could do to help Arden because there was only one hose!

Diana: No bucket, right?

Krista: The problem with using the bucket was that it reduced the amount of water that he was getting. So I did fill up a five gallon bucket a few times, so that kept the fire from getting our truck because it was just kind of creeping through the grass. It wasn't...

Diana: Roaring over?

Krista: It wasn't at that point, you know, the biggest part had already gone through. Mostly what it was, was just our stuff burning then.

Diana: The buildings until they had completely burned down?

Krista: Yes.

Diana: So who were some of the people or agencies that proved most hopeful?

Krista: Oh goodness. Well, a big shout out to Russ Hensley for letting us use his machine and to the Reimer's for letting us use their truck and to my daughter and her friends, Tanner and Hannah. Or Tanner came out and Hannah didn't come because they had a little girl. We decided it was too smoky for her to come. But to her for letting Tanner come and help. Mark and Katie Krier came out and helped a lot.

Diana: Did you have any of the volunteers that came to town?

Krista: Arden didn't want volunteers because he wanted to go through his tools and stuff by himself and he felt like other people needed the volunteers worse. He felt like we already had a pretty good crew, so we did not ask for volunteers to come out.

Diana: Did you apply for the funds through the community foundation and the KLA?

Krista: Yes we did, and they did bless us very much that way.

Diana: So did you come in and eat at the camp or at the high school during that week?

Krista: No, we didn't. I think for me it was it was too soon to really talk to other people about it and to hear their stories because it was just...

Diana: You were still trying to deal with your own?

Krista: I was still trying to deal with my own and I guess I'm a family person.

Diana: So how many miles from Ashland is it to come to town?

Krista: Eighteen.

Diana: So it would take a while to get here and go back. So did you volunteer any after the fire?

Krista: I did not. I've had a lot of back trouble recently. It was kind of all we could do to clean up and do stuff. We would have lost our dog if Arden hadn't been there because our dog pen was right next to his shed.

So we had to build a new dog pen and there were just other things that I needed to do.

Diana: I wouldn't either with that kind of a deal. So what about your emotional response to the fire? Have you done anything to kind of deal with the loss that you suffered?

Krista: It took me a long time. I'm just starting to deal with the loss because we were so blessed in that we still have our house. And for a long time, I didn't feel like I could grieve over that stuff.

Diana: Yeah.

Krista: Because other people had lost their homes, they had lost their pets. You know, we had all of that. We had our house left; we had all of our critters. We didn't have to go out and shoot cattle. We had our propane tank and we were so blessed. For a long time, it was hard for me to realize that it was okay to grieve for things that I lost because they are just things.

Diana: And they were different things.

Krista: But they were important things of the past. There were several antique pieces of my grandma's. There was a lot of the kids' toys and stuff that we stored in the old house. There were a lot of memories of her in the old house that burned.

Diana: Had you brought some of her things over to your house?

Krista: Some of the more important things, we did, and of course anything that we used, we had over there. But like some of the kids' toys that weren't as important, I had all my pictures over in the new house. So like I said, they were just things like some of our old Christmas decorations that we don't use as much and a lot of furniture we hadn't brought over just because we didn't have room for it yet and I didn't know where I wanted to put it. My breadmaker! I don't use it often; it was over there.

Diana: You miss that.

Krista: Now it's like, oh my, now I want to make bread.

Diana: So of the things you did lose, do you have something that you miss the most?

Krista: What do I miss the most? I don't know. I think some of my grandma's things that we didn't get brought over, I miss. But again, we were fortunate because we did take a lot of the most important things out. So it's been hard for me to say, "Okay, it's okay to grieve," because we were so fortunate and God watched over us. There were so many miracles.

Diana: Throughout the whole county.

Krista: Throughout the whole county. Personal ones, countywide, just statewide, the fact that there was only one person lost around here, as horrible as those fires were.

Diana: So what you think the fire cost you more physical or financial, the effect of the fire, is it more a physical thing because of the loss or is it financial or emotional?

Krista: Oh goodness. It would be easy to say financial because my husband lost quite a bit. They had a lot of programs for cattle and all of that, but they really didn't have a program to cover tools lost in sheds.

Diana: That's true.

Krista: He had a very nice lathe out there. Just all of his big stuff is gone, and some of that we'll never be able to replace because he had gotten them at sales and some of them had been given to him. So those things

are financially there. Emotionally it was really hard to lose the old house; that house has been a part of me and my life since I was a baby.

Diana: Was it a hundred years old or close?

Krista: It was close. It was at least 80.

Diana: So you have a ways to drive into town and to drive back home. How has the landscape changed from before the fire and after the fire? I mean, what types of things are missing?

Krista: Well, you know, when it first happened everything was just black. Then it was just like, "Whoa." The things that I see now are the trees, the trees that didn't burn to the ground but they didn't live; you can see the black charring, and some of the houses that are no longer there. Otherwise, things really have started looking more...

Diana: Are there any landmarks that are gone that you used to depend on?

Krista: No, there none of those. Like I said, some of the houses. I don't know why, but for some reason, it touches my heart, the Wilson house, you know there and when we go that direction to Protection. That one always made me really sad. But other than that, the trees really catch my eye because they just look very sad, all charred and burned.

Diana: Were there are a lot of dead cattle up in your area?

Krista: Not as much. We had quite a bit of wheat, you know. West of Ashland, there's very little farm ground and a lot of the farmers around us got their cattle onto the wheat pastures. There was some wildlife, one of the things that hurt my heart was we had a deer at our house that had to be put down because her front hooves had been burned completely off. That was very hard. Wildlife, it was mostly wildlife around our house. It was really sad.

Diana: Like coyotes too?

Krista: I didn't see any coyotes.

Diana: Mostly deer?

Krista: Mostly deer. There were two feral cats that got caught underneath our old house that I didn't even know are out there, that they found. It kind of made me sad that I didn't even know they were there. But it also made me sad that they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Diana: So can you perceive anything positive that resulted from the fire?

Krista: Anything positive? I think the most positive thing I saw was the way that the community came together and the way people from out of state heard. One of the things that really made me angry was the way that it was not on the news, not even Wichita much. But nothing on the national news, and yet people from Wisconsin and people from Michigan found out about it and they brought things. I cried when I saw all the hay and stuff come in from other people. If there was any good that came out of it, that was it-- to see that, yes, there are still good people in this world and in this community and in this state.

Diana: Did you see the caravans that came in?

Krista: Yes, I did, and it just did my heart good, it did.

Diana: So what are some things you have done or that you plan to do to prepare for a future fire?

Krista: Move away from Kansas! I figure one of the things is that we will have metal buildings with metal roofs. If we replace the roof on our house ever, it will get a metal roof. I don't know what you do about a tree row. We're old enough now that we probably won't ever plant another tree row. So just burning stuff, trying to keep... This year the weeds have been so horrible because we had so much rain afterward and the weeds got out of control. So trying to keep the weeds down is a big huge thing. We're still in the process of cutting down trees that were burnt.

Also, if there were more people in the rural areas that had mobile water tanks, 500 gallons or more, could they be first responders and perhaps get fires put out before they get huge? Perhaps they could receive a tax break on their equipment as an incentive.

Diana: Is your pasture looking... I know it came back and looked green, what's it look like now?

Krista: Now it looks like a weed patch.

Diana: More weeds than grass?

Krista: More weeds than grass, unfortunately. We have Paul Harden's cattle in there now, so they're kind of trampling down the weeds. We've just been trying to do burns when we can, but it's just been so windy that it's been difficult.

Diana: So what about the community? What can the community do, or has it done, to prepare for future fires or future emergencies?

Krista: Not being in town, I'm not sure what they are doing. I'm not sure what they can do because we can't afford to pay firemen to be there. And the fact was, there just weren't enough firemen. I think everybody keeping their tree rows and stuff clean would help. But when you have a fire of that size and you have winds like we had, I'm not sure that there's much that you can do to stop it. If everybody had a tank that they could keep out on the farm and what have you, but that's just not feasible. It's just not feasible.

Diana: They came from a different direction, too.

Krista: And they did. That was the other thing that really touched my heart, all the volunteer firemen not only from our community but from surrounding communities that came.

Diana: Did you see some of the trucks, those strike teams? Were they out in your area?

Krista: Yeah, they were taking care of other people's fires, but there were different colors and engines. It really did touch me how people responded to it; I think that's what saved Ashland. It was the farmers and what have you that got out there and disked and did what they could and that was a big thing for me.

Diana: So do you have any other thoughts that you'd like to share about this experience?

Krista: I think it's a one in 100 years event and I'd just as soon it waited at least another hundred years before it ever happens again. God forbid that it ever happen again. But you know it has given me a perspective when I see the fires in California, when I saw the fires in Montana. That was the other thing that touched me big time, was Ashland was in there sending stuff to Montana. We have a good place. We've got good people.

Diana: So are you guys going to try to rebuild some of your sheds?

Krista: Arden is going to rebuild a new shed, one shed. He has everything. It's going to be a metal building. It's going to have a metal roof. I don't know that having more hydrants would have helped us. I don't think it would have. I just don't know what else we could have done better, other than maybe keeping our tree row cleaner. But like I said, that's not a problem anymore.

Diana: But if it came through the air.

Krista: Yeah but who knows? If we hadn't had a tree row maybe...

Diana: It wouldn't have gotten in there. It's a "what if" game though.

Krista: Yeah, that's a "what if" game and you know what? You kind of need tree rows because it is just too windy without them. So all of the things that I can think of that would help are just not feasible.

Diana: And besides a windbreak, it's kind of a snowbreak, too.

Krista: Yes, because it was to the north of us.

Diana: So anything else?

Krista: No.

Diana: Okay, thank you very much for sharing your experiences.