

Steve Elmore

Diana: What is your name?

Steve: My name is Steven Elmore.

Diana: And where do you live?

Steve: I live in Ashland, Kansas.

Diana: What is your occupation?

Steve: I am a salesman with United Telephone, United Wireless.

Diana: How old are you?

Steve: Sixty-two.

Diana: So when did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter we will refer to it as just “the fire” that happened on March 6?

Steve: I was listening on the radio as I drove around; I spend a lot of time in the car. So I was aware that there was a large fire down in Clark County, but it really struck home when my wife called and told me. I’m going to say it was about 2:30 or 3:00. She worked for the school, and they had just evacuated the school, or told the community that they were going to evacuate the community. I am the hospital board chair, and she told me they were evacuating the hospital as well, maybe I ought to come home and be available.

Diana: So what was your immediate reaction when she was telling you this?

Steve: Holy smokes! I thought, “Well, this is going to be... a nightmare.” Of course the first thing I thought about was from the hospital standpoint. Evacuating all of the people and the logistics of that and all that type of thing. I know we typically have plans in place for all of those types of things, so you worry how well the plan is going to work when you have to implement it. I think that was my initial reaction. I needed to get home so I could help in any way I could.

Diana: Did you have any trouble returning to Ashland?

Steve: Well, yeah. I couldn’t get out of Dodge for one. They also had fires going on in Dodge City at the same time on the highway out of town, it was all closed off because there were fires burning across it. So I took the country roads and went around west of the fire and then came down south of the fire and hit the highway going on down to Ashland. When I got to the Englewood junction, west of town, there was a state worker in a truck, Mark Fulcher. I drove up and rolled down my window, and he said, “Well, you can’t go south, the road is closed.” And I said, “How about east to Ashland?” He said, “It’s still open, but I don’t know for how much longer.” So I went ahead and drove into town. This was at about 4:45 in the afternoon when I came through, and of course you couldn’t... The wind was blowing out of the west at that point in time, and almost blowing due east. So all of the smoke... You could see smoke south of the highway probably three to five miles. There was

nothing on the highway at that point in time. So I was able to drive into town on clear roads and not see any evidence of the fire until I got to what I call Gardiner Valley right there, the flat spot. You could see flames and everything way down south at that point in time. It was a big fire.

Diana: So had Sally evacuated?

Steve: Yes, when I got home, she had already left. She has a sister that lives in Protection, and she had gone to her sister's house, and was staying there with our two dogs. So I came into town, and of course drove by the hospital. The hospital was empty. So I knew there was nothing I could do there. I went to our house and pulled out some sprinklers and set them on the west side, to hopefully help if the fire came. Maybe it wouldn't catch our house on fire. Then I thought, "What do I do? What do I grab?" and then I thought, "I don't know." So I went through and just did a video pictorial of everything in our house, so that if we lost everything, I would at least have something to go back and remind me of what all was there, so I wouldn't forget it.

Diana: So did you stay in contact with Sally?

Steve: We talked a couple of different times. And I know that they later had to evacuate her sister's house. Her sister and her brother-in-law stayed. They didn't evacuate, they just stayed. But she didn't feel comfortable, so she went ahead and went to Coldwater and stayed at the gymnasium in Coldwater with a lot of other people.

Diana: So did you stay in Ashland?

Steve: I left Ashland about 5:30 or 6:00. When I set out the sprinklers in the back yard it was about 5:30. The wind shifted at that point in time and started coming out of the northwest. So all of a sudden, the smoke went away. And I thought "Wow, maybe we dodged a bullet." And then about twenty minutes later, smoke started rolling in. And my neighbor came over and asked me what I thought, and I said, "You know, I know what the fire looked like out west, I don't know what the fire looked like up north. So I don't know what's coming, or what we are in the sights of. I need to get out of town a little further and see what's going on."

So at that point in time I drove out to the east edge of town along a tree row across the street from Bisel's property. I pulled in there and was watching, and you could see the fire race over the hill from up northwest and start to come down. My neighbor pulled in beside me, and I told him, "We are not far enough west." Because the fire was threatening at that point in time, moving very rapidly. We were in the path of the fire.

Diana: So did you know that there were two fires at that time?

Steve: I didn't know... I knew there was a fire up north, because when I came south of Mineola, I saw the very beginning of one of the fires up north. It was right by one of the wind turbines, and it was a very small fire at that point in time. But I knew with that wind there was no telling what it would do, and I think that is the fire that grew, and then came down towards Ashland.

Diana: So how far west did you go?

Steve: Well, I went from about a quarter mile, half mile west of town, out to Garth Gardiner's house and pulled into his driveway, which put me west of the fire and on a high spot that we could see. At that point in time we were actually... Garth was there too, and several other people. We actually watched the fire at that point in time. That was about 6:00 or 6:45 when I shot some video that showed the fire jump the highway and go racing

by what we call the T.V. tower, which is United's tower, go flying by it and head right towards town. And I thought, "Well, we have lost town." But that fire stayed west of town and burnt down to... what would it be, the southwest corner of town and missed town. It just missed our new hospital, by about three hundred yards.

Diana: So did you come back to town?

Steve: Well at that point in time, there was still lots of fire, and there was another fire that was further west of that one, and one further east, and there were multiple lines of fire coming down. And I realized that at that point in time, that probably, I needed to get further west. Some volunteer firefighters stopped by and said, "You guys need to move further west." You know, there was still plenty of fire all around. And of course the wind was blowing about sixty miles an hour, so the fire was moving sixty miles an hour. They said, "You won't have time to react, just get further west to protect yourself."

Diana: So how far did you go?

Steve: Well, I went and drove across Gardiner's, the creek right there, and I didn't like being there because you are down low, and there's trees, and you can't see over the hills. So I thought, "I want to get up high to where I can see, to be sure that I am safe." I actually went to the top of the hill right before you get to Kiger Creek, and pulled off to the south side of the road and parked there. A state trooper pulled up beside me, and he sat there too. We stayed there until about 12:30 or 1:00 in the morning, and watched the fire. I really thought Ashland had probably burnt at that point in time.

Diana: Did anybody come by?

Steve: The road was closed at that point in time, so there was nobody on the highway. Once in a while, a firetruck might come or go. They had the road blocked at the Englewood Junction west of us, and then the road was also blocked east of town, so they weren't letting anyone into that area. I figured, "I'm sitting with a state trooper, he is in radio contact, if we need to move, he is going to know it." So I was fairly comfortable. We sat and watched the fire for hours, you know, three or four hours. It was dark, and we could watch how things were moving and watch it burning all over the place, and of course, there were fires everywhere. And I mean, you might have a tree row that was still on fire and burning. The wind calmed down, so it kind of settled down a whole lot at that point in time, and the fires weren't expanding as rapidly as what they did before that. But it looked like the whole countryside was on fire.

Diana: So what was reaction to that, your emotions?

Steve: Devastation. I mean, recognizing how extensive this fire was, and how big it was. Just from what I could see, the amount of area that was burnt. And like I said, we could see where the town of Ashland was, and there were big flames there, and you could see that they had been burning for a long time. That is what made me think that the town had actually caught fire, but it hadn't. It was out at the landfill where they had a big tree pile and I think that's what was burning and causing all the big flames and everything there.

Diana: So was there lots of smoke? Could you see town through the smoke?

Steve: Well, at that point in time, the wind had stopped pretty much, and of course it was dark. You could see flames, but most of the smoke was going straight up at that point in time. Because there wasn't any wind, it was

virtually calm, and it was kind of a surreal situation. Knowing all the chaos all around and then being in the calm. So we just kind of sat and the state trooper and I visited. He had been on duty since 5:00 that morning and here it was midnight that night. And he was the guy that was in charge of the whole district at that point in time. So he had guys calling in and coming and going, and it was an interesting time frame.

Diana: So then did you go back to town?

Steve: Yeah, about 12:30 I looked at the officer and I said, "You know, it looks to me like the fire has gone south and east of town, and whatever in town is there looks to be fairly safe." I said, "I'm guessing the highway is still closed." And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "But, it looks like I could take the southern dirt road and come into town on what we call River Road. And I think that is a safe passage, but, I don't want to do that if you don't want me to."

He said, "I've been with you for a while, and I'm a pretty good judge of character, and I think you're smart. I don't think you are going to do anything stupid." He said, "Just be careful that you know the way in and out and around." So he said, "Go ahead and go in and you can check and see what is going on." So I drove into town at that point in time, and I drove by the hospital, and of course kinda drove around town, and saw that nothing in town was burnt at that point in time. You could smell smoke everywhere. I went home and turned my sprinklers off because I figured that they didn't need to be on anymore.

I found the local law enforcement and reported to them that I was in town, and said, "I don't know what I need to do, if I need to leave town. But I can't go to Protection or Coldwater, which is the evacuation center, because there is fire between me and there." He goes, "You're right, you need to stay this side of the fire now." He said "Tell you what, go ahead and go home, and if we get another close call or anything, I'll come by and check on you, I've got your cell phone number. I'll call you, make sure you are out of town if we need to evacuate again." So I went home thinking "Okay, what am I going to do?" And of course the smell of smoke was so bad I decided there was no way I could sleep, I was too paranoid about the fire coming back.

So at that point in time, I'm going to say that it was probably about 1 or something like that in the morning, I drove down to what was the emergency operations center at the emergency preparedness office. And because I am in the communications industry, I checked in with Millie Fudge, our emergency management director and said, "Millie, I'm here if there is anything that I can do. If you need any communications help let me know." And we sat down and talked for a while, and after a while, I looked at her and said, "What's the biggest concern that you have headed forward that you don't know how you are going to take care of other than the fire?" And she said, "I don't know how we are going to feed all of these guys breakfast in the morning." And I said "Oh, well I can take care of that." The day before, work had contacted me and said, "You have a company credit card. Anything that needs to be done, you do it and let's take care of the community, because Ashland is one of our telephone towns and it is very important to us, that's our roots, so to speak."

So I had decided I would just drive to Dodge and go to Walmart or Dillions and buy all of the frozen breakfast that they had and everything like that and figure something out, and then I thought, "Wait a minute, McDonald's is open 24 hours a day!" So I called McDonald's and said, "Don't hang up on me, I need to talk to the manager." The manager came on the line and I said, "This is not a prank call, I'm serious, I work for United Telephone on the south end of Dodge, and there is a massive fire in southern Clark County and we are trying to figure out how to feed all of the fire fighters."

And I said, "I know you have 'just in time' delivery of food, don't know what you have on hand, don't know if you can help us, but I had been told that our best guess was probably about eighty firefighters, half of them in Mineola, half of them in Ashland and Englewood." So I said, "Can you do an order of 160 breakfast burritos, and about 80 hash browns?" There was a long pause on the end of the phone, and the guy came back and goes, "Well, how soon do you want them?" I said, "Well I'm probably about a half hour or forty-five minutes away." He said, "Oh, I can't have them that quick, you might have to wait fifteen or twenty minutes, but yeah."

I said, "Okay, I have a credit card, will pay for it all and take care of it, go ahead and get started." He told me, "Just drive through when you get here." And so I drove up to Dodge. As I drove out of Ashland, I went by our T.V. tower, as we call it, which is our cell tower too, and of course it was burnt completely around, and of course there was a power pole that was burning, and it had burnt off at the ground and the power line was kind of hanging over the road. I was kind of afraid it was going to fall, but it was still up, so I drove on through. Talked to the roadblocks and told them I was on my way to Dodge to get breakfast and that I would be back, and stopped at Walmart because Dillon's was closed. They weren't open 24 hours anymore.

So I went to Walmart and bought like four cases of water, and then went to McDonalds because they said it would be awhile, and told them, "I'm the guy with all of the burritos." So they said, "Go ahead and pull up." He asked me, "Do you want these in a box?" And I said, "Yeah, I need something to carry them in." And he said, "Okay, we'll put everything in one box and bring it out to you. We will put all the burritos in bags of ten, and then we will put the hash browns in bags of ten so you will have some idea of how many you have." About ten or fifteen minutes later, they walk out and put a huge bag in the front seat of my car. I took a picture of it and put it on Facebook and said, "This is what 160 breakfast burritos and 80 hash browns looks like." Course my car smelled like McDonalds for about a week after that. Then I drove back to Ashland from Dodge.

Diana: So when did you get back with the burritos? You said that you stopped in Minneola?

Steve: It was about 2:45 I think, when I left Dodge. Now of course a normal trip is about an hour drive time, but I had contacted Millie Fudge at the emergency management office and said, "Okay, I'm on the way." She said, "If you can, why don't you stop at the fire department in Minneola, and I will have somebody meet you there for their crew." I met the chief at Minneola's fire department and gave them about half the food, and then drove on south, and when I got to Englewood Junction, the state still had the road blocked, and I pulled up and said "How many guys here?"

They told me that they had two, so I gave them four breakfast burritos and a couple of hash browns and drove on. Then when I got to about Gardiner's, that low spot east of their house, the highway patrol was there with the road blocked. I pulled up and he came over and said, "Oh, I remember you driving through here going to Dodge." So I said, "Well, I've got breakfast if you want breakfast." I gave him breakfast and said, "Is the power line still in the air?" He said, "Yeah, it's still up there, but we don't know for how long, so just be careful."

So I drove on into town, I stopped at the EOC and left some food for them, and then took the rest down to the fire station for them to hand out to the crews as they shuffled through the fire station. Then I sent a message to my office and said, "We need to be prepared to fix lunch, because we have got breakfast covered. I know that they will be able to do staging and some things once it becomes daylight, and their normal processes will kick in, but we need to help them out before those processes have a chance to kick in." We have a couple of big commercial barbecues grills in a trailer, so I said, "Bring down the trailers, bring a couple hundred hamburgers

and hotdogs so that we can feed the firefighters a hot meal and go from there.” So we had a crew that came down from Dodge and provided cookers and we fired everything up and fed them at the station.

Diana: And you just set up at the Ashland Fire Station?

Steve: The Ashland Fire Station.

Diana: And everybody came there or sent out from there, right?

Steve: That was kind of the clearing house for the firemen and the EOC dispatch people. But they were dispatched over radio, everybody staged through the fire station, because with their trucks, they would come in there if they were close and fill up with water, and then be able to also grab pallets or cases of water to be able to throw on their fire trucks, and have available to splash their face off. They had provided... they had sack lunches and stuff like that for the day. I think it's the normal course of procedure that they do when they have fires, and so the firemen are used to cycling through there as best they can, you know, as they go west or east past the fire station, they stop and grab stuff and go on from there.

Diana: So besides food, did you do anything with communications?

Steve: Yeah, we turned around and a situation where, talking with Millie once they started staging the emergency preparedness, I'll call it a strike team that would come in, they realized that they were going to have five trailers there and different people doing different things. So what we did is, we brought in some wireless routers to provide the internet connections for them, and then we also have some wireless landline alternatives, that gave us the capacity that we could just set a box there that they could just plug a desk phone into it, and have a functioning phone, and not have to worry about cell phones that, you know, can transfer handsets back and forth between people, and still have their own cell phones and still have their own lines of communication with their own personnel. So we put those into play and got those up and running while the state was still bringing in their resources to provide the backup.

Diana: Was this early Tuesday? Or late Tuesday?

Steve: Yes, this would have been... They brought them down when they brought the trailers with the grills and the burgers and the hotdogs and all that stuff, and we brought down a bunch of water too, from the office in Dodge. So we had all that stuff up and running by about, I'm going to say about 10 or 10:30, Tuesday morning.

Diana: So did you spend a lot of time through the week, or until the fire was over, at the EOC?

Steve: You know, I checked in with my office and they said, “Just do whatever needs to be done. Anything that they need done, be there to help.” And so I just told Millie, “I'm here to help, whatever you want me to do.” And I spent a lot of time there just making myself available in any way that I could.

Diana: So what kinds of things did you do?

Steve: Well, they had personnel come in that they didn't have computer stations for, so I hooked up my laptop and let them use my laptop. I was there to do connectivity when guys would come in with laptops, then we would hook them up. I helped check in and check out firefighters and stuff like that. I turned around and of

course that next evening, we had a situation, water started rolling in, and resources started rolling in, and I started helping unload trucks and you know, whatever needed to be done. Because I know the area too, as the Blackhawk helicopters started flying in the next day, they were trying to communicate with them and they were using the airport, and they needed somebody to take somebody out so that they could talk to the Blackhawks. So I said, "Here, I can drive somebody out there, I know where it is, that's fine." So I went ahead and drove the guy, the emergency coordinator, out there, and just made myself available for things like that. I ran errands, would go deliver stuff, pick stuff up, worked with the dispatch in that regard.

Diana: So how many days?

Steve: You know, I worked a whole week probably. I mean the fire started on Monday, and I think it was Tuesday afternoon of the following week that I finally went back to the office and checked in. Because at that point in time, everything was winding down and getting back to normal.

Diana: So what stands out most vividly, what is your most vivid memory of the fire?

Steve: You know, I'm a religious person, and the thing that struck me, was the Lord's intervention at precise times. I can't help... One of the most vivid timeframes for me was, I was in the EOC, and this would have been Tuesday afternoon. A call came saying, "I've got fire headed to my house, my barn, I'm going to lose everything. What can I do?" And of course, dispatch would call and tell the fire crew that was close to there, you know, that so and so is being threatened, and they would try to go over and help them. And I remember one call coming in, talking about, "Our house and barn... Our barn just caught on fire, the house is threatened."

I remember the dispatcher saying, "Well, we don't have any units available that we can dispatch. Keep yourself safe. We will try to help if we can, but in the meantime, just be safe, and we will try to get help to you." And I remember them disconnecting and I remember thinking to myself, "We've lost the war." And at that point in time I had to leave the building, and I walked outside, because we were stretched so thin. I knew the fire fighters were exhausted at that point in time... Some of them had been on the trucks since 10:30 the day before. When they got called out, they were going to go help fight the fire in Oklahoma, got to Englewood and realized, "It's gonna be here, we don't need to go fight it in Oklahoma." So they stayed there and staged and started protecting stuff down there. So I knew these guys were getting exhausted, because they had been fighting the fire for so long. I just, you know, my emotions. I had had a couple of hours of sleep, is all I had had, just kinda taking a nap. And my emotions just started welling up thinking, "It's all over."

Right at that point, there was also a call that a house in town had caught on fire. Of course fire departments keep town trucks on reserve in case a house catches on fire, just for that reason, and so they went to go fight that. I can just remember thinking, "It's over, and we've lost. Nature is going to win." And right then, the first strike team from Colorado showed up. They showed up with eight trucks and sixteen guys.

They came walking up and they said, "We're here, where do we need to go check in?" And I just burst out in tears, and the guy hugged me and said, "Don't worry, we are here to help." He said, "We left at 6:30 this morning, we've been driving all day to get here." Like I said, I think that was about 4, and they said, "We'll check in, and we will go up and fight this fire up on the lake road," because that's where it was at that point. "We'll analyze it and stop it if we can. We will let you bring crews in to rest, but we are about out of hours, we've got to shut down before too long." And then they took off, and then right after them, four more strike

crews showed up. It was just like waves, they just kept coming in and coming in and coming in, just in the nick of time.

Diana: So have you ever had any other experiences with wildfires before?

Steve: I have not been involved in fires. I mean, I have been involved in disasters, I worked the Greensburg tornado. I was in emergency response for Caterpillar, I worked for Caterpillar in the power generation industry, and I provided generators. I was in Greensburg the morning after the tornado hit, to come and help staff up for the emergency management teams to come in and set up their emergency operations and to provide power.

Diana: So you did pretty much the same type of communication?

Steve: I didn't do communication, I did electricity. I was the guy that provided the electricity for everything to hook up, and so that was kind of a unique situation. You asked about neat things, the other thing was that the next night, Tuesday night, when all the fire crews were here. The school of course stepped up and, you know, they canceled school a couple of days early to send the kids on spring break. So the staff at the school said, "We'll put all of the people up and have the firefighters come stay at the school, we'll use the cafeteria, we'll feed them all," that kind of thing.

So everybody staged at the school, and about 12:30 that night, I think it was Holcomb, a local city, showed up and said, "We've got a couple of pallets of water for firefighters, we want it just for the firefighters, that's what it's for." And so we drove up to the school, and all of the fire trucks were parked in the parking lot. There were a total, when it was all said and done, of 94 fire trucks and 192 firefighters, I think is what the count was. But we put a case of water beside every truck that night, so when they came out in the morning, they could just grab it and throw it on their truck and go on from there. So the outpouring of the public and everything, from the onset... was just unbelievable.

Diana: Were there some of the people or agencies that proved to be most helpful?

Steve: You know, it was interesting. Watching... Having been through the Greensburg tornado, that was right after Katrina, and so FEMA was very sensitive about that situation. I remember the response in Greensburg before, everything was going along real well with the local people, and then FEMA came in and everything stopped. FEMA said "This won't happen, this is the way it's going to be." The local people gave up control of the situation.

So they took control of everything and changed everything, and in a lot of cases it was for the worst. I'm sure they thought it was for the better, but it really shut down the volunteer efforts in a lot of things. In the case of Ashland, some of the people that were in charge, and some of the emergency operation personnel that came in, of course, had been through the Medicine Lodge fire the year before and had learned a lot from that. So there was a high level of experience.

Some of the people said, "You know, you have a choice. You can either control this fire Millie, or you can have somebody step in and control it. It's your choice." And they kind of said under their breath, "If you have somebody else control it, then you lose control of the fire." And she said, "I think we need to keep control." And so she rose to the task, and did a great job. All the people that helped her, I mean it was phenomenal. There was a team of, I think, eleven emergency managers that came in. Each had a certain job, and they did it, and

worked very hard to make sure that it worked. Sometimes the bureaucracy of other agencies got in the way of making things happen.

There were some problems with flying in and having airplanes. And of course, there was another fire. The Hutchinson fire was going on too, which had substantially more people threatened, because of the population back there. So the state was really focused on there, because that was in the news. There was no talk about the fire here. We even had firefighters that came here, that had been in Hutch for two days sitting around and unable to fight fires, because they had too many firefighters. And they said, "We're here to fight fires." I remember a Benton fire team that came in and said, "We called our chief and said that we were just sitting here, so we are leaving and going to Clark County, because they still need help." So you know, coming from Lawrence, I mean we had fire teams from South Dakota that were here. It was just amazing.

Diana: Did you participate in the daily meetings.

Steve: Yes. I was kinda the fly on the wall. That was the neat thing for me, that's what really made me feel really good about watching it all. You know, I didn't have an official capacity, but I was told that I had an unofficial capacity, and not to worry about it. So I was able to listen in and be a part of some of those meetings, and understand what was going on, and I just tried to stay out of the way.

Diana: So who was part of those meetings?

Steve: You have the emergency management team, and that team is made up of what we call the strike commander, which was Millie Fudge, the local emergency manager. And then she had all of the regional teams that would come in and each one of them would be assigned a different area. One guy would be communications, one guy would be fire coordination, and one guy was the resource manager, and different things like that.

They would be in touch with like the state and the national forest service. I mean a lot of these teams came in from Colorado, and Wyoming, New Mexico, and South Dakota. Those were all forestry teams that were called in by the state forestry service to man up and fight the fire. I asked the guys... I remember asking a couple of them, "So, you've been on some big fires?" Because I had lived in Colorado for a while, and I knew some of the big fires that these guys talked about being on. I remember them as big forest fires on the Front Range.

They said, "You know, we've never been on anything this big." At that point in time, we knew it was 700 or 800 thousand acres. You know, lots. They said, "I've never been on a fire bigger than 150 to 200 thousand acres." So this fire was four times... three or four times bigger than anything they had ever fought. I said, "Yeah, but we don't have the mountains." They said "Yeah, but you've got some ravines and some rocks that are just as big as we run into." So the difference here is that they go down, they don't go up. They said, "We can see the fire here, where we usually fight fires, we usually can't see it, we usually just see smoke, and we have trees everywhere, so you can't see anything, you don't have trees. But your grass is five foot tall, and over the hoods of our fire trucks."

Diana: So were there any local people at those meetings in the morning?

Steve: Yes, there were. What you had is, you had the fire teams' commanders, and each one of those strike team commanders. They were able to coordinate with the drop people, the airplanes that were flying and the

helicopters that were dropping because they had the communication capability. But each one of those guys had a local guy with them so that they could tell them the lay of the land. So if dispatch called and said, "Yeah, we've got a fire out at Dennison's, or we got a fire out at Gardiner's, or Giles'. You know, out at Lake Road 23 miles, or whatever the nomenclature is, we had people that knew those locations. Then they functioned as directors and guides for the teams. So it was a very good coordinated effort.

Diana: What do you think you can do as a person to prepare for a future fire, or what the community can do?

Steve: I think that one of the things that we look at and talk about... I was struck by, "What do I grab?" Okay, I mean, what is important? What can't I replace? And I made the mention to my wife, I said, "We need to go through, and we need to put together a grab box that has like insurance policies, and birth certificates, and passports. Things like that that are in a place that we can grab and go when we need to grab and go."

The other thing we have talked about is just buying a fireproof safe, so that we could keep it in that, so that it was always protected, but if needed to evacuate or go, we could open it and grab it and go. We look... I mean, I talked to a lot of the people that lived in country, and talked about how the fire burnt right up to their house, and quit. We talked about Divine intervention, and time and time and time again. I know they had a community meeting, and people talked about how the fire would be burning straight at the house, and all of a sudden just change directions, and spare their house. It made you cognizant of maybe what vegetation you had by your house. You thought about those types of things a little more. You know, if there was a fire coming, "Am I contributing to that fire? Am I contributing to the potential? Or am I inhibiting that fire and potential?"

The other thing I've thought about, our firefighters are volunteers, and I've talked to our fire chief and I've said, "You know, I'm out of time all the time. But I sit and I wanted to help, but I know you can't let me help you." So maybe I need to figure out what I can do. His comment to me was, "Being able to drive a truck makes a big difference." So there's lots of little things that can be done. I mean, I spent time at the fire hydrants where the trucks would come in and fill, and basically just turned hydrants on and off. Carried water, provided food. There are lots of things that can be done in events that big, but most of the time you don't have something that lasts for nine or ten days.

Diana: So what do you think the community can do to prepare?

Steve: You know one of the things that we talked about... Because we did recaps of everything, what worked, what didn't work, what do we need to do better. Being on the hospital board, of course, we are moving out of the old hospital and into the new hospital shortly. The discussion of, "We have a generator, do we want to make that generator available to some other facility so that in the event of extreme situation, be it an ice storm, be it a wind storm, fire storm, whatever." If we hadn't have had power in this town, it would have made things a lot more difficult. You start talking about water wells. How do you pump the water up to the water tower? Being an in the emergency generator business before, I've been through many ice storms. I've pulled up to towns when they didn't have electricity, and their water tower was empty, and I had the generator that was going to power up the city pump. So we need to look at those things, we need to think about those things, and there is a lot of that stuff going on, but it's amazing, a year or two years from now, and people will forget about it and go on from there.

Diana: So like hearing communication. How did the fire affect United Telephone's structure of its... how it delivers telephone and internet to the places... Did they have any losses?

Steve: Yeah, we are actually still fighting that. We call that infrastructure, a lot of that infrastructure in our business, we have elected to put underground. The advantage of that is that it's not as susceptible to ice damage, to fires, to things like that. Like the electrical. I know that CMS, the rural electrical area around here, and the city, just in some of the short runs outta town... spent a lot of time repairing lines. You know, poles burnt down and so lines came down. From our standpoint, most of our stuff is underground or wireless. Because this fire moved so fast in a lot of cases, it burnt right by our tower and didn't hurt it. We have gravel around all of these facilities, just for those reasons. So that if there is a fire, it doesn't actually burn up to our building. We have generators that back it up, we have propane tanks that power them and things like that. And so they are designed to typically survive those isolated situations.

But, if you look at how we build stuff, they run it underground until they run out of cable, and then they come up out of the ground, make a connection to the next cable and then go down to the other one. And if you know what to look for, you can drive down the road and see them every couple of hundred yards, because they ran out of cable. And those are called peds, where they come up and make those connections. In those connections, where they are above ground, we may have had some cabling, some insulation that melted, in some of those cases if the fire stayed around it and was hot enough. In the country, we may have lost some of the connections to houses and stuff like that, where the connections on the outside of a house may have burnt.

We have a very extensive wireless network that covers our southwest corner of the state, which is our home territory. In most counties we have three to five wireless communication towers, and cell phones. Those have battery backups as well as generators, but we hauled fuel to those sites and we had things that went down. The other thing that we did, is we provided cellular phones to the guys that came in out of state, that had a carrier whose services didn't work here. So we made phones available to a bunch of those guys so that they would be able to communicate as a last resort.

Diana: So did you have any physical or financial damage yourself?

Steve: Personally no, I did not. I live in town, my house was not affected. You know, everything smelled like smoke, but everything in the whole town smelled like smoke for weeks. It took... We got some rains that next week that... Usually they say that lightning creates ozone and will dissipate that, but the smell was so thick with smoke, that I mean it was literally weeks before it finally subsided.

Diana: So was there anything that strikes you as funny, or something that you can't forget about the whole week of fire. Something that happened that kind of stands out in your mind?

Steve: You know, there are multiple things that happened, that you sit and you look and you go, "Wow." The biggest thing was the aid that came pouring in from outside the region. We have people here now in town, building fence, volunteering to build fence. It made me very proud of my community to see the people step up the way they did, and throw in the way they did to help. We had towns in the northwest part of the state. Sharon Springs was the town that all of those kids gave up their spring break and came down here and helped. We had kids out of WSU, we had a squadron, or part of a squadron of airmen that they called up from McConnell Air Force Base and said, "We don't know how to build fence, or anything else, but we are young and we are strong. We will come out and help haul out trash and stuff like that."

I mean the outpouring was just phenomenal. It was just amazing to watch all of that. As far as individual stories and stuff like that, just the total outpouring of everything, and the way everything worked when the bureaucrats got out of the way and let people do things. There were some snafus, there were some problems. I mean we had farmers who said, "Use my lake to dip out of with the helicopters to put the fires out with." Then the state came in and said, "No, you can't do that, because we don't have signed permission letters from these people." Just little things like that. We had equipment that they were begging for that was a day late getting here because they wouldn't release it from someplace else to come here, and they weren't being used at the other place. Just politics at its worst. Usually when you let the politics go away, and let the people react, in most cases the people do a phenomenal job.

Diana: So do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you would like to include? Anything that we have forgotten?

Steve: Just a big thank you to everybody. I mean the amount of personal work that went into this. There were little old ladies that called and said, "Our church wants to provide a meal." The church doesn't have any money and yet they are like, "We will do whatever we can to help." The amount of preparedness. I know that there were a lot of people that... You know, we have a camp in town that wasn't ready for the camping season. A bunch of people went down and said, "We need to get this open so that we can put people up in bunks and give them showers and that kind of thing." And they spent multiple days working on everything to get it up and operational and then once the school... spring break was over, we were able to transition them out of the school and down to the camp and provide that and the camp has been open all spring and summer for people to stay that have volunteered to come down. Watching all of the semi loads of hay and fencing equipment and crews coming in to volunteer and help. It makes you proud to be an American, and proud to be a rural American, to see the response of rural America.

Diana: So when did your wife come back?

Steve: The next day actually. Late the next day, I think about 8 or 9 p.m., something like that. She came back from Coldwater, checked in with her sister to make sure they were all right, and then came on home.

Diana: Did she help with the volunteer stuff? Or was she too busy with school?

Steve: Yeah, she works at what's called the Tabitha House, and the Tabitha House was trying to schedule clothing. Anybody that needed immediate clothing could come in and get it and some things like that and then some coordination and that type of thing. She did some meals, came in and helped with the food service and stuff like that, the high school and the very first stages. There were just lots of things going on and lots of people volunteering.

Diana: When did you get your first full night of sleep?

Steve: Well, the fire started Monday morning. Monday evening, Tuesday morning early, I got a couple-hour nap. And then I think it was about 9:30 or 10:00 Tuesday night, I went home and I slept hard until about 7 or 8 in the morning and got up to go back down to the EOC. So it was... I was much more fortunate than a lot of other people because I really didn't have a job, I was just there to do anything that needed to be done. So people weren't counting on me, so I just said, "I'm going to go sleep until I'm tired of sleeping, until I wake up. And then I'll get up and I'll make myself available, and I will be more useful that way." That came in handy because

we worked until 12 or 1 in the morning just about every morning those first few days. Just staging stuff for the firefighters and stuff like that.

Diana: So they did close the EOC at some point?

Steve: No, it was open 24-7.

Diana: Someone was there all the time?

Steve: Someone was there all the time. I don't think the EOC closed until probably, I'm going to say two weeks after the fire. I think the last firefighters left...

Diana: They left on Saturday.

Steve: I was going to say, late Friday they were destaging and planning to get out Saturday.

Diana: The county was turned back over to the local firefighters at 11 on Saturday.

Steve: And I thought there was... One crew stayed overnight Friday night and was on standby, but it was pretty much mopped up at that point in time from what we were seeing. But, after the fire is over, then comes the paperwork. And when you deal with a disaster like this... the mounds and mounds of paperwork that have to be done and processed because you have to account for all of the resources that were used. Everything that was mobilized, everything is key on what went well, what went badly, how do we improve. It's a growing process constantly so that they are better equipped. And my hat is off to the Kansas Emergency Personnel, for the level of coordination and activities that they were able to pull off. It was a phenomenal feat when you look at it and think of how everybody came together from different parts of the state to make it happen.

Diana: So anything else?

Steve: I mean I could go on and on with stories, but they are the same stories that other people are saying too. It's just, the thing is you look now and you don't really see the signs of the fire. I mean I remember right after the fire, going out and taking pictures of the surrounding communities, and how close it came to town. And then a week later, I mean three days later after the rain, there was grass starting to sprout everywhere, and ten days later everything was green again. It was amazing the recovery that was able to happen because the Lord provided the rain and were able to go forward from there.