John and Diane Humphreys are 65 and 61 years old, respectively. They live in Ashland and own Home Lumber, a chain of home improvement stores.

**John:** I was aware of the fire much earlier than when we received the evacuation. It was probably the day before. But as far as any kind of warning for Ashland, I didn't realize it until we got the evacuation notice.

**Diane:** Do you remember what time that was?

**John:** It was around 3:00 in the afternoon.

**Diana:** What were your perceptions? Did you know about it?

**Diane:** No, I actually was at a dentist appointment in Dodge City at 1:00 and did not know there were fires going on at Ashland or Clark County. I figured that out after I could not leave Dodge City because of a fire that was south of town there. So I came back through Bucklin and realized that I was driving in smoke on the Bucklin road, which would be Highway 34. John had called me and said, "Where are you?" And that was at 2:47. I could see those fires which would have been north of Ashland at that time. Then when I got to the Sitka Junction, I looked to the southwest and saw this tremendous plume of smoke and thought, "I need to take picture of this."

So I stopped and took a picture and then started to drive into town and was just noticing the people's faces as I was driving. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. But I still didn't realize what I was driving into. All I knew was that I needed to get home and be with my husband, not realizing then how bad it was. John had said that they were going to evacuate, but all I knew was I needed to get home and start packing and leave.

**Diana:** So did you evacuate?

**John:** We let people go home from work somewhere between 3:00 and 3:30. I went home; Diane wasn't home yet and we could see the police cars going around and warning people but I couldn't hear them. I even tried to run one of them down.

**Diana:** Because the wind was blowing so hard?

**Diane:** That's the other thing, the wind.

**Diana:** And the smoke? Couldn't see the sun through the smoke?

**John:** Yeah, you know in Ashland, it didn't seem bad to me at 3:30 until we left. We left town at 5:22, and that's where our story begins. Do you want the story?

**Diana:** Where did you go?

**John:** After driving around Ashland and thinking that it was a safe place to be, we saw Hervey and Sandi Wright leaving town. I had told Hervey when he went home, "This is serious; you have to pay attention to it." So we saw the two of them leaving town, and I said, "Diane, we'd better follow them." So we followed them out at of town on 160 to the east and we got about three miles out of town, three or three and a half. We kind of lost Sandi and Hervey in the smoke. At that point it was brown smoke, a little dirt and a little smoke. We came up on them and actually had to swerve to miss them. They were sitting in the right hand lane. They had just seen a couple of vehicles go off the road in front of them, so they were afraid to go on. When I pulled up beside them, by then the sky had turned from brown to black. And then we saw embers coming across the road and then we saw the flames. The orange glow and then the flames were right there.

**Diana:** Coming from the north?

**John:** Coming from the north. At that point, we hadn’t known that it was east of town, or that there was a possibility of it even. So we drove through it for... I really don't know how long, maybe a mile.

**Diane:** Or farther. Road 23 for a half a mile to the Sitka Junction.

**John:** To the wheat field on the north side. I had Diane roll the window down so she could see the road because I couldn't. She would say, "You're okay, you're okay." Then "thump, thump, thump..." and I'd get back on the road. Hervey was following us just as close as he could, because basically while he'd been sitting there, his car had melting trim on the body of the car and that sort of thing. So the two of them decided to follow us closely. We drove through it and got out of it at the wheat field a half a mile from Sitka. At that point, the girls could see the flames going across the road on the Sitka Hill a little bit further east, which would have been about the time Matt Wilson's house went up, I'm sure. So we turned off into the state or county parking area there and there were at least six or seven cars, including Vernon Howell, who just rolled down his window and said, "I think I just lost my house." Sam Brown was there; he had been through the ditch but ahead of us coming into Sitka. He was pretty well shaken. Was Mary Kaltenbach there?

**Diane:** Mary Kaltenbach was at the Sitka Junction.

**John:** With her grandson. She was pretty frantic, too. We decided to go south. So this whole line of cars was following us going south. We got to the state line and really didn't know which direction to go because there was some phone communication going on and Sandi had heard they were getting ready to evacuate Buffalo. So at the state line, we stopped this whole caravan and two truckers were coming up the road from the south. We tried to wave the first one down and he didn’t slow down a bit. He eventually was the one who died north of the Sitka Corner. The second one was a lady and she said it was okay to the south, so she turned around and followed us to the south. Our destination was Coldwater; we thought that was the place to be. So we turned east to Buffalo before you get into town. Maybe a mile to the east there was a highway patrolman pulled off the road, 20 yards onto another road going south with his lights on. So we all pulled up in there and asked him, "Are we going in the right direction? He said, "I don't know." I said, "Do you have anything on that monitor in your car that could tell us anything?" "No, no, they're evacuating Buffalo. East is probably as good as anything." That was frustrating.

We went east and you could see the smoke getting heavier towards Ashland, and then turned back north at that corner, that highway that goes into Coldwater. We were driving pretty fast because we didn't know whether that fire was coming across that road too. We knew it was getting really dark, it wasn't clearing up any until maybe five miles from Coldwater. It was pretty much a high speed run. I guess we thought we were outrunning it. We all got to Coldwater, some of them pulled into the parking lot across from the Dollar General. Most of us went to Roy Hoffman's rental house in Coldwater. One of the silly things was before we left, Diane was cooking a pot roast. I said, "Let's take that." Because it smelled really good. Another gal, Teresa Jellison, brought in some lasagna. I think Roy said there were 20 people there, like six or seven kids, six horses, and four dogs that gathered at his place. That's pretty much it.

**Diana:** What time did you get there?

**Diane:** Seven-thirty, and we had left at 5:22. It took us two hours.

**John:** With just a couple, three small stops in there. We were driving fast.

**Diana:** Did you take stuff with you when you left? Did you decide that maybe you needed to take some property or some valuables?

**Diane:** That was that was the hard part; trying to figure out what to take and what not to take. I just remember important papers. We gathered those up, but there was no way I could keep all my picture albums and get all those, so I just threw them in the dryer and the washing machine in the basement. So that was... Not knowing if that would protect them. Then I just remember looking at the house and realizing, you know, it's just stuff. Life is so much more important than stuff.

Then I said that I would miss some of it, but some of it I won't.

**John:** We've very fortunate; we didn't lose anything, unlike a lot of the people you are going to interview.

**Diana:** So when you were in Coldwater, were you hearing things from Ashland? Were you in touch with people?

**John:** Yes, everybody had cell phones.

**Diane:** Dr. McPhail was one we stayed in touch with.

**Diana:** Because he came back?

**John:** And we stayed.

**Diana:** He took some residents over to Buffalo and came back.

**Diane:** I think that was reassuring on our part to have that information, to know that these brave firemen were protecting our town.

**Diana:** So when did you return?

**Diane:** The next morning.

**John:** Early the next morning, highway 160 was closed. So we went south and took the back roads to Protection. I've forgotten how many miles it was. Instead of ten miles, it was more like 30, back in that remote area.

**Diana:** Like where you go out to the lake and out that way?

**Diane:** No, we went south of Coldwater and then came in on that. It was somewhere close to Buttermilk where we turned back west. I think we were back home by 7:30 that next morning.

**Diana:** Did you hear when you could return or did you just decide to come home?

**John:** I felt like I needed to check things out at the office for sure, because we have an internet hub that connects our stores there. We did that. The house was fine, beyond all the soot, eventually. It was pretty eerie.

**Diana:** Did you go back to work Tuesday? Did you volunteer?

**Diane:** I volunteered at the high school, but also, Robin McPhail and I just started cooking. That was the only thing we could think of to help. We took food out to Bouziden's before noon, knowing that so many of them had not even stopped to eat.

**Diana:** What type of things did you take out?

**Diane:** Cinnamon rolls and sandwiches and water.

**John:** We had a couple of friends that came out.

**Diane:** The following weekend.

**John:** That's when the high school was moving to the fair grounds. So we all helped on that.

**Diana:** So what's your most vivid memory of the fire?

**John:** Being engulfed in flames.

**Diana:** While you were driving?

**Diane:** Yes, our car was engulfed.

**John:** It was going across the highway, just as we got into it east of town.

**Diane:** And having the embers in the car because we had to have the window down to see the white line. And I just remember the glow at the bottom of the trees. I've not ever seen the glow like this. It was beautiful, but then it got real scary.

**John:** That was through the black smoke, you could see that orange glow.

**Diane:** Just before we got to the fire.

**John:** And then the flames.

**Diana:** Windy?

**John:** Oh my, yes.

**Diane:** As I look back, it's like, you don't even know how many people were on that road at the same time, because you could not see. Did you meet anybody going west?

**Diane:** We didn't. Other people did.

**John:** I don't think there would have been anybody else getting out of Ashland after us on 160. I don't see how that could have happened.

**Diana:** The last people that I know of that got out about 5:30 were in the fire. What was your knowledge of or experience with wildfires before this or any fire. Did you have any?

**John:** No, I mean I'm pretty familiar with controlled burns that have gotten out of control in the last 20 years. I'm always interested in what goes on in the Flint Hills and what do they do with the burns. But I've never seen one up close, or one that was going that fast.

**Diana:** So can you describe your emotional response to the fire and how you learned to cope with it? Have you talked about it a lot with people and kind of talked yourself through it?

**Diane:** I think that's what helped, was to have people that... "I don't want to bother you, but..." My cousin Mary and her husband Steve Engler came from Kansas City that following weekend and it did help to be able to talk about that. It was a traumatic experience and you should talk about it.

**John:** It was pretty obvious, pretty fast. After talking to other people that had events that were closer to death than ours, that we were very, very fortunate. That kind of helps you. The only thing I was thinking of when we were driving through fire was, "I've got my wife in here, I've got a young couple behind me. I'm going to get down this road." They, all three, tell me things I didn't know. All I wanted to do was drive as hard as I could through the fire and get out.

**Diana:** Did anybody know where you were going? Did you tell anybody.

**Diane:** I did. I texted a family member to let them know that we had evacuated and were headed to Coldwater.

**Diana:** And once you got there, did you check in with anybody besides Hoffmans?

**John:** Yeah, we checked in with the kids. My sister Karen called just as we were walking into the Coldwater High School. It was a text actually, something like, "Are you aware of the fire and have you taken precautions?" I just texted back, "Yes." That was it. I was pretty shaky still.

**Diane:** My niece from Sublette, I just found this out today, was that she had called numerous times and could not get through because of the amount of calls that were being made. She finally got hold of me after we arrived in Coldwater.

**Diana:** So what about Iras and Tom, they're in other states. Was there anything on national news that we were having a fire here?

**Diane:** No.

**Diana:** Could they tell you anything or were they aware of it? Did you have to say, "Oh, by the way, we're okay."

**John:** On my family's side, Karen got the word out to them.

**Diane:** On the national news, no. None. I think the closest regional coverage was in Kansas City. They heard about it, but it was their local news that said something and then the Wichita stations.

**Diana:** That was the night that Kansas City was having all the tornadoes and were having weather problems and were not willing to let most of their fire fighters come for mutual aid, even to Hutchinson, because they still had that.

**Diane:** Okay, well you know I want to make a note that my history was that 42 years ago this month, I was in the Big Thompson Flood, also. I was right in the middle of that, where 140 people lost their lives. I was also in a terrible tropical storm in Cancun. So this would be the third natural disaster that I've been in.

**Diana:** That's kind of amazing.

**John:** She's still alive!

**Diana:** Yeah, that's kind of cool.

**Diane:** Not really.

**Diana:** That you're still here. But it is interesting to have that many natural events in your lifetime.

So do you have any physical or financial effects from the fire?

**John:** I would say absolutely not. That’s how fortunate we were.

**Diane:** Yes.

**Diana:** How were you when you got to Roy's?

**John:** Shaky, ready for a drink or two.

**Diana:** Anything positive come out of this fire that you can perceive?

**John:** I'm still overwhelmed by the charitable acts by so people from so many states. Were you at the Community Center Saturday?

**Diana:** No, I wish I would have been.

**John:** I wish I would have been too.

**Diana:** I wish they would have taped it, the bus ride. Lost opportunity.

**John:** Just number one, a lot of people have connections to Ashland. The agricultural community, how tight and strong it is and the good hearted people out there.

**Diane:** I thought our nation was needing to see something like this. I just felt so much better about humanity to see the pouring out of love and concern for each other on their own. Strangers who became friends, too.

**Diana:** Did you meet any of the volunteers that came to pull fence or do that stuff?

**John:** Oh yes. Jay Anderson's girls, we had them for supper one night and they were exhausted. They'd been out on the Dunne Ranch pulling fence and were worried about snakes. The fact they were there, is just unbelievable. The other thing, you gain a greater appreciation for, unfortunately, in tragedies, is the local fireman, the Ashland firemen, the Ashland Feed and Seed, the community foundation and some of the other entities like the hospital and the nursing staff. They handled things so well. It was something that was completely unmanageable. I mean really it was; and it got handled as well as it possibly could.

**Diana:** So what do you plan to do in the future, or have done, to help prepare for another such act, whether it be a fire, or tornado or something? Do you have a plan now? Do you have some hindsight or things that you would do differently or want to do?

**Diane:** I think everyone should have a to-go box ready to go, that you can grab and leave in a moment's notice and maybe a list of supplies that you should have on hand to take with you. I've always had something ready for tornadoes, but not for a fire.

**John:** The emergency preparedness people did a great job, but there has to be a better way to get that information out. When Millie Fudge presented her program to the civic club, she said that. There is a network out there, but a lot of us didn't know about it. There are ways, whether it be a superintendent getting hold of all the parents in school... There are ways to get that information out. We should have turned on K101. We didn't.

**Diana:** They didn't have anything because we were listening to them. The most they had was that Buffalo was evacuating and there were fires north of Woodward that they thought were headed toward Woodward and that they might have to evacuate Woodward.

**John:** That was part of it. We just didn't know where to go. We knew we couldn't go straight east, we'd had enough of that.

**Diane:** I think Englewood actually had a patrolmen down there that was helping people figure out which way to go. They had that communication going when we left east, we were on our own. We did not know which way and we probably at that moment should not have gone any farther.

**John:** We shouldn't have gone, in hindsight.

**Diane:** In hindsight, wheatfields do make sense. Green wheatfields do make sense and that was eye opening, not knowing we had a green wheatfield right on the edge of town that.

**John:** The agricultural community knew it, they were spending all their time getting their livestock to green pasture.

**Diane:** You wouldn’t have known, you're not involved in that.

**Diane:** No, I'm not. But I have passed that information on to many people, about the green wheatfields, to get in the middle of it.

**Diana:** So how do you think the community can prepare? Like you said, the emergency preparedness, we need more activity there or preparation.

**John:** You know, it's funny that some of those shelter belts from the 30's and 40's didn't burn, but proactively, they probably ought to be taken care of. Some of the deserted homes probably ought to be taken care of. And I don't know what that would take, some kind of funding that nobody has, but it's just a tinderbox. When a cigarette can do that... Other than that, I don't know. We make our living and we're stewards of the country. We do as well as we can with the land. I just am thankful we did have enough farming out here to at least get the fire diverted in some ways, because that is what saved Ashland. Part of what saved Ashland was the green.

**Diana:** Now not so much.

**John:** No, it's gone.

**Diane:** We don't have much green left, do we?

**Diana:** Do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd like to share, that you think are important?

**John:** I've said it before, but I just can't believe how fortunate we were and how much I'm in awe of the people that really had to fight through the fire to save their homes, to save other people's homes, to save wildlife and cattle. It just makes me proud to be from this area, again.

**Diane:** Strong people, very strong people, that they were on their own.

**Diana:** In more ways than one.

**John:** I do think the community's coming back stronger than before. I've talked to people that I don't talk to very often, but when I see them on the street, I want to hear their story.

**Diane:** Because everyone has a story.