

Jamie Wetig

Diane: Okay, today is January 11, 2018. What is your name?

Jamie: Jamie Wetig.

Diane: And, where do you live?

Jamie: Ashland, Kansas.

Diane: And how old are you?

Jamie: I am 42.

Diane: And what is your occupation?

Jamie: I am the Superintendent of Schools.

Diane: Okay. USD 220?

Jamie: Yes, ma'am.

Diane: Okay. When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as the fire?

Jamie: Well, all day, on was it March 6<sup>th</sup>, is that correct? March 6<sup>th</sup>, it was kind of gloomy and cloudy, and so I really thought we were gonna get some rain. So, I had been working in my office looking outside all day, just wondering when the storm was gonna hit. And then, at some point, you started to see the ash come down, so it was probably in the afternoon of March 6<sup>th</sup>. Again, I just thought it was cloudy, it was gonna rain, and then the ash started to come down and I thought, okay, something's going on, and something's not right.

Well, Deb Pearce called me shortly, she is our Director of Transportation, and she said, "Hey, there's a really bad fire going on and we're not gonna be able to take the kids home." And so that was in, I think, the southwest portion of our district. So, at that point we had put out the message that bus riders who were in the southwest portion of the district, parents would have to pick them up. Well, shortly after that we get the call and we couldn't get kids to the northwest part of the district. So, we made the decision at that point that any bus riders were gonna have to be picked up by their parents. We sent the message out. We put it on social media. And then the third call comes in and it was, we need to probably look at canceling school early because people are gonna have to get home and there's this big fire coming.

And so at 3:30 I believe it was, we made the decision to cancel school. So even though it was – and we get out of school at 4 o'clock. It was about 3:30 we made that decision, and about five minutes that later Millie Fudge called me and she said, "Cancel school." She goes – well, I guess you know what, she said to evacuate the school, get the kids out. There's a fire coming. And I told her, I said, "Well, we just canceled about five minutes ago," and so we were just waiting on the kids' parents to be picked up.

Diane: So, when you send out a message to the parents, is it just over social media, or do you text, or call, or how do you get messages to the students' parents?

Jamie: So, we do social media, which is Facebook and Twitter. And then we also do, what we have is Go Edustar, which is the school messenger, so it's a text message or an email, or both, to all the parents.

Diane: So, did you run any buses that day?

Jamie: We ran the buses that morning to bring all the kids to school, but we didn't run any buses for the kids after school. All the parents picked their kids up within 30 minutes and we were out of there by 4.

Diane: Okay, did you evacuate from Ashland?

Jamie: I did evacuate. I was probably – I made sure that all the schools were locked up. Made sure everybody was out – employees, staff, students, and then I went home. And I guess, the funny part of this story with me getting out here is, my wife shows up at school and she doesn't know what's going on. And so she just knows there was a fire coming, and she grabbed the dogs and she comes up to the building, and I'm like, "Calm down." I said, "Maybe we should go back home and get some clothes first, get everything we need, and then we'll leave." And she just hadn't heard anything. Of course, you know, being at the school, we received the call from Millie and we knew exactly what was going on. But yeah, I did evacuate. My wife and I, we went over to Coldwater.

Diane: You spent the night over there?

Jamie: We actually – so, when I got to Coldwater, one of my first concerns were the kids. There were so many Ashland people, and so many kids in Coldwater, and nobody really knew what to do. So, the only thing I could think of was, one, we used our school social media as well as messenger to send texts out. And so, we were always – I was sharing communication with our parents. But one thing I really take a lot of pride in in what we did that night, or that night is, I rounded up about 20 kids who were there in Coldwater and we went to the pizza place so the parents then could kind of reflect and process what was going on. People could get some information out. So, when I was in Coldwater, I took about 20 kids to the pizza place and we sat down, we ate pizza, so we spent about an hour, hour and a half there, before we came back to the high school. That night, about 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock, when we knew that we weren't going back to Ashland, we went ahead and drove over into Dodge, stayed the night in Dodge. And then about 7 o'clock that morning we headed south back to Ashland.

Diane: So, did you have any trouble getting to Dodge by then?

Jamie: We didn't have any trouble getting to Dodge via the highway, yeah.

Diane: Going that way, going to Greensburg and go across that way?

Jamie: Correct.

Diane: So, let's go back. When you say 'messages,' and you say, 'we send them out.' Who has access to be able to send that out? Is there someone besides you, or you the only one?

Jamie: Well, so, I'm the one that probably did most of the messages, if not all of them. But the person who has access would be myself, and it'd be Mr. Endicott who is the Elementary principal. You know, and our secretaries would also be able to send messages out on our system and social media. But I believe I was the only one sending the messages out during that time period.

Diane: So, you got to stay at a hotel and have a good night's sleep before you came back to kind of assess what was going on in town?

Jamie: Well, we went back – we went over to Dodge. I don't know if we had a good night's sleep, but we did shut our eyes I suppose for a few hours. But we were right up early, and back in Ashland as soon as we could be back on that next day.

Diane: So, the school became very involved in helping with volunteers and feeding help, and all that stuff. How did you get that all set up, and who helped set that up?

Jamie: Well, when we came back on Tuesday, I knew we had to do something. Most of the things that administrators or educators go through are school crisis plans that have absolutely nothing to do with fire. I can tell you, there wasn't a class I took that said, "Hey, how to deal with a 400,000-acre fire in your county." It's usually with school violence, or things like that. So, I just knew that there was something we could do and we should be doing. So, Mr. Endicott and I went to the headquarters where Millie and the Emergency Management was, and we just asked. Nobody really seemed to know. But, by that time, I had already started receiving phone calls from superintendents around the area, and everybody was wanting to do something, checking up on us.

So, I can't say enough, first, about the schools in our area, because every single one of them called. Every single one of them called. Every single one of them offered help. Asked what we needed. And so, I knew, right now we had this want, this desire from people outside to help us. And so that was kind of – how should I respond to that? There really wasn't a good answer. So I said, "Hey, we will be the donation spot." Because, the question was, do you want me to have them drop off the donations here at Emergency Management? And the answer was no. So, right there I said, "Okay. We'll take all the donations." And then I said, "How can we help? We'd like to help with food. We've got a kitchen. We can cook. We can raise money." And we ended up helping with lunch, and then we put on dinner that first night.

Diane: How did you get out the word that you weren't having school that week?

Jamie: So, we again used our social media, and our school messenger, and that in and of itself was kind of one of those things I sat on the edge of my seat, because I was in touch with John Ketron, our Sheriff, and trying to contact Millie. And everybody was so busy. And, you still didn't know the extent of the fire at this point. You don't know who's affected. You don't know where these people are. And so, I waited till the last minute to cancel school on Tuesday. And then we didn't cancel school on Wednesday or the rest of the week until Tuesday night. So, we were really kind of playing it minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, just trying to get all of the updates. But, you know, we ended up canceling school for that whole week. Tuesday night, like I said, in the morning we kind of established a couple of things we could do. And by that night we had already contacted – we had had a parent come in who must have been off one of the ranches and said, "Hey, we can't go back to our house. We need a place to stay, or we need food." Because, we had put on dinner that night. And that really started the ball in motion on, what can we do if we have more families come?

Diane: So, who came and helped make meals? And, did you use mostly the school staff to do that, and students? But, how did you get all that going besides the donation part?

Jamie: I guess the good answer is, I don't know how it all came together. It just came together.

Diane: People just started showing up?

Jamie: They did. I guess, people knew there was – maybe it was just the 'want to' of other people as well. To answer your question on who it was, predominantly it was the staff who ran the school. So, if you look at the kitchen, because we would just say, "Who wants to come in and help?" We had our cooks come in, Sarah Hammill, and Ann Daily came in, and Juanita, and then we had some of our staff, Rebecca, and then Alison.

Our custodial crew was there, Brian, Scott, and Georgia. And then, you know, I was there. Jason helped out, and Deb helped out. And in fact, if we jump back real quick, you asked about, did we use our buses. Deb Pearce, on the night of the fire, you know, we didn't transport our kids, but we do have a handicapped accessible bus, so she drove it. They asked if they could use a school bus to transport patients from our hospital. So, Deb did use it. So, our bus was used. It was used to transport the patients from the hospital. But our staff came when they heard that we were serving meals, so they just volunteered to come. And we had about nine staff members that worked that entire week, and we did have some community members come in and help. But what was amazing is, like I said, there was a family that came in that first night asking for some stuff. And we thought, "Oh, my goodness. What if more people come? We're not ready." We ended up getting hold of the Red Cross. And I guess Chris Miracle and Lexi Miracle got hold of the Red Cross because they're also staff members and they helped. And they brought us a trailer with some cots. So, we set up 20 cots. Well, we didn't know if anybody was gonna come.

Diane: And where did you set them up at?

Jamie: We set them up in the library. And, we had just finished setting up about 20 cots, and John called, Ketron called, and he said, "Hey, I'm gonna send about 40-50 firefighters to you." And we were like, "Whoa. It's a good thing this trailer's not gone." So, we went back in the trailer and we grabbed the cots and we set them all up. And so, we had about 50 or 60 cots set up in our library. And we wanted to keep it separate from the cafeteria and the gym, because you know, it would be quieter and darker and better for them. Well, they ended up leaving a lot more, the whole trailer there, for the most part with the cots in there and we set up about 50 or 60 cots. And so, the first night we hosted about 50 firefighters, and you know, obviously came from all over the place. Well, our staff stayed because we ended up cooking breakfast the next morning, cooking lunch the next day, cooking dinner that night, and that just happened. And I can't really explain how it happened. I mean, our staff just stayed for that whole week. We ended up serving breakfast and lunch and dinner for the rest of the week, all the way through the following Monday.

Diane: So, did they kind of get a schedule, so that they weren't there 24 hours? Or, did they kind of do 8-hour shifts? Or, people come in?

Jamie: Well, so, Chris – C.J. Miracle and Lexi Miracle actually stayed the night there in the school every night. I stayed the night four nights in my office. But when you look at a schedule – I don't know if we really had a schedule. We just kept showing up, and the individuals who would help with the food, they would be there early, and they would cook, they would serve, they would clean, they would take a couple of hours off, and then they'd come right back and they would cook, serve, and clean.

Diane: And where did you get the food? And what kind of food would you get to serve?

Jamie: It was school food. It was everything that we had purchased for the kids through the school year. So, for the first – well, that Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, everything we cooked was from our food service department.

Diane: Was it kind of like what you were planning to serve for lunches that week, kind of enhanced?

Jamie: It might have been. I guess that's a good question to ask Sarah. But it could have been. And I really think that we had just gotten to a point, because we don't serve 600 meals a day, and we were serving about 600 meals a day when you look at the number of people coming in. You know, I say we had about 50 firefighters on Tuesday, we had 110 on Wednesday.

Diane: And these are the strike teams that came in to help fight the fire that were from like, Colorado, or South Dakota. Even some of those from in Kansas that came?

Jamie: Correct, strike teams. Correct. Correct.

Diane: And what did they do in their down time, these firemen, while they were at the school?

Jamie: Well, they did just about anything, and most of it was lay down and sleep. But what was neat is the way we had it set up is, our cafeteria really was open 24 hours a day. So, the strike teams were going in and out. So, they would go in for a few hours and then they would be called out to where a fire started back up. And as I said, we had tried to put all the cots in the library, but after that first night, we realized, we weren't dealing with, you know, everybody's gonna sleep for 8 hours and come back. You've got a team of 7 here, and they're called out at 3 in the morning. This team is called out at 6 in the morning. So, any time you would call a strike team out, you'd wake everybody up. So, that second day, we actually put them in classrooms as a team, with their team, so we could open up and wake up one team without waking up the whole group. But on their down time, they would come in. They would always grab something to eat. And then they would, for the most part, sleep. What was nice is, we have the facilities there where they could go shower and then we also have the gym. And by the end of the week, some of our kids – because our kids even came and helped out, were playing basketball with them, and really bonded. And I think that was probably unique. That was something we heard quite a bit from these teams. A lot of times when they go to these places to fight fires, they sleep outside. They don't have the amenities. They don't have, certainly don't have the full-service food service that we do. And they don't bond with the community as well. And here, by the end of the week, not only were we serving the strike teams, we were serving the ranchers, and the community, and the volunteers that were showing up, so everybody was coming in at some point.

Diane: So, you said you were the donation drop off point.

Jamie: Yes.

Diane: So, what kind of donations did you receive? And where did you put it? Give me some examples.

Jamie: Everything. Everything. Everything. So, you always hear about the response to emergencies. And everybody talks about how overwhelming it is. And until you have experienced that, you don't understand what that means. People want to give. If you can say it, we received it. But it was clothing, it was food, it was canned food, boxed food, it was hygiene items, it was truckloads of water. I think we had if I'm correct, at least four semi-trailers that came that was just water, bottled water. We had so much water, which was great. But, where did we put it? We actually stacked it in our hallways, all the food we had. When we finally had it organized, it was almost like you were in a grocery store. You could walk down our main hall and you would have all the different types of canned goods together, fruits together, and vegetables together, and the boxed dinners together. But even on the flip side, we had all the hygiene items on one side as well. And then, I can't remember – I have a picture, but if you looked at our wall in our cafeteria at that time, it was filled 5, 6 deep and high of bottled water, so it was pretty amazing. And then again, we had just so much clothing that was dropped off. And even when people would call up and they'd say, "What do you need?" And the answer would be, "Hey, if you want to send a donation, great." People would show up with trailers full of anything and everything. So, it was an amazing, wonderful response. And I guess, even on that – when our firefighters would come back and some of them had allergies, we would send out a message and say, "Hey, we need some eye drops, or we need some allergy medicine." And within an hour we would have an amazing amount of people who, from our community, had bought, brought, and we wouldn't need any more. I mean, it was really just amazing.

Diane: Still have some.

Jamie: We do. You know, we donate a lot, and the school as asked to take what we need, and so we did take some things and we put it in storage. And yes, we still do have some of that.

Diane: So, did some of the donations that you received at the high school, did some of that go to Englewood? Did they share, take some of it down there?

Jamie: Yeah, we had people that were coming to drop off donations, and we would route them to Englewood. And then after they would drop off donations, we had other people who were working, I don't know if they were working with us, but with the schools, that we would load the donations up and then they would take them out to the different ranchers in the area. So, yes. Correct.

Diane: That needed stuff. Did you get a lot of monetary donations?

Jamie: So, the school, we created a Go Fund Me page. And we ended up raising, I think it was about \$20,000 through the Go Fund Me page. We received several thousand dollars' worth of gift cards. And I don't know if we really had a lot of cash donations. Again, most of it was directed through that Go Fund Me account. We, as a school, looked at every family that had kids who lived in the school district. And I know that we had a student that had graduated, and we had kids who weren't even enrolled yet. But we wanted to, since we were the school, we wanted to directly impact with those donations, kids who live in the district. So, we just divided the money evenly amongst the families. And then we divided the gift card evenly amongst each kid, and that's how we distributed them out.

Diane: And when did you distribute it? Was it a while after the fire, or was it while the fire was going on?

Jamie: It would have been after that week. At some point we said, "Okay, let's get rid of this. We don't want to hold onto it. We need to get rid of it." And so it was probably within the first two weeks after the fire. And we said, Okay, we have \$20,000. We have this many families affected. Divide it by that many families. And then we have this many thousands of dollars of gift cards. We wanted to make sure each kid got an equal amount, and so that's how we ended up distributing it to the families.

Diane: So, when did you know that you didn't have to fix meals anymore, or provide sleeping quarters for strike teams?

Jamie: That is a great question. You know, we talk about, did we have a schedule as a staff. We just all were there. And all that we were there because we wanted to be there. We were all asking that question by Friday, how long are we doing this? I mean, at that point we had done that for four days, and it was kind of like, what's next? What is the plan? How do we shut this down? And like I said, we served the strike teams, and then all of a sudden by the end of the week, when things weren't to normal, but the fire was pretty much subsided, and the ranchers were coming in, and all of the volunteers were coming in, and we were providing. And we thought, wow, we are really now doing a lot more than we even had thought we would do. And so, I do want to make sure that we note that Tyson brought – because, as a school we were running out of food. So Tyson brought a tractor trailer full of hamburgers, hot dogs, and chicken patties. And for three days we were able to serve those. And not only did we serve them, but anything that was left over, Tyson said, restock your school with what you need to use, and then donate the rest of the food to the community. So, we need to make sure that we note that.

Diane: So, did you get all of the goods that the school used to feed people restocked, reimbursed, or are you still, didn't get everything quite brought back up?

Jamie: So, we really didn't – I mean, we stocked our freezer with the Tyson donation. But you really didn't gain, because those are three items. You didn't gain all those side items we used. You know, we gained the main dish, which we really appreciated. But we didn't – we haven't received any donations or funds or monetary contributions to the school. We did – and I guess let me go back. I believe Stock Growers gave us a \$500 check during the week to help pay for it.

Diane: So, were you still serving volunteers at the school when they opened the Christian Camp?

Jamie: Yes.

Diane: So, they had two places?

Jamie: We did. And they – the Christian Camp came and grabbed some of the Tyson food as well. So, I know that a lot of the times, that the Christian Camp is volunteers, and we were still serving the strike team. And then we were still serving, and we would actually send meals out, or people would get meals to go for the volunteers that were going out for lunch and things like that. I'm not for sure how many meals the Christian church was serving at a time, or if they were just doing dinner, and we were doing the lunch. So, we were, yeah.

Diane: Did you send out a lot of sandwiches?

Jamie: We sent out hot meals. Not sandwiches. Anything we cooked we sent out. If the strike teams were out on the field and couldn't make it in, someone would come and take 20 meals and then we would send it out. But getting back to that question on when was that point when we were done serving? We didn't quit serving meals until Monday morning, that following – so, almost one week later, that Monday. And that was only because that was the last strike team to leave was Monday morning.

Diane: And that was your Spring Break. You went ahead and had Spring Break. Did you have to kind of put the school back in order that week to be ready to get back to school? How long did you have the Red Cross cots after everybody left?

Jamie: We still have some. They told us to keep them. They told us to keep some, so we actually kept quite a few. But the school really – so, you don't realize how much soot is tracked in. All that burnt ash was coming in. And so, we had them in the library. We had them in the classrooms. The entire building needed to be cleaned.

Diane: Do you have carpet in most of your classrooms?

Jamie: We have carpet in the library. But even at that, when you go into the locker rooms and the showers, I mean, it was just covered in ash. It was just on everybody's clothes. And those strike teams, they don't necessarily – they don't wash their clothes until the fire is done. So, that was a concern. And so on Friday, we started to have some community members come in and help cook, and that's probably the time when we were all getting very fatigued. So, Friday, Tyson came in and kind of helped replenish some of the food. Saturday we sent out the message. I met with Emergency Management and I said, how do we end this? How do we start to close this down? And so, we sent out a message saying we're only going to serve the Emergency Management workers. Well, everybody still showed up. And then Sunday, everybody showed up. And finally, we said we're done serving after Sunday. And we still had people showing up on Monday, but we shut the kitchen down. Eventually, just the fact that we shut the kitchen down...

Diane: And they had to go elsewhere?

Jamie: Right, they had to go elsewhere. But that really was the question on how – how do you shut it down when there's still such a great need? You know, everybody was very appreciative of that, because they had these volunteers there, and they didn't have to worry about cooking the food, or bringing the food, or feeding anyone. So, it was a tough decision to make, but as you said, we started thinking, we had Spring Break, which we were thankful for, but we only had four days to get the school back in shape. And we had – the hallways were still filled with all these donations. Our shop had pallets of donated items in there. I can't remember – we had several discussions, and the decision was made to move all the donations to the 4-H grounds. And so, I believe that was on Monday evening.

Diane: Sunday. Sunday evening.

Jamie: Okay, so Sunday evening the call went out for anybody to bring a trailer up, moved all the donations, and within an hour we had so many people there. I think it was probably within an hour, all the donated items, for the most part, were moved over to the 4-H grounds, which was amazing. And at that point, we could shut the lights off and shut the doors and say, now, tomorrow, we have to start getting the school back in shape. And our custodial crew did a great job, and we actually called in, for the library, like a carpet cleaner, Carpet One, or whatever. And they cleaned it all up for us.

Diane: So, you had all these strike teams that usually were five trucks per team. Did you have room for all the trucks in your parking lot? Did you have overflow? How did that work?

Jamie: Our parking lot was big enough to hold all those emergency vehicles, but that was all that was really in there. But it was neat.

Diane: Did you do both front and back of the building?

Jamie: You know, I think most of the big trucks were parked up front, and there probably were some vehicles in the back, but I think that, some of the pictures that we took, all those vehicles were parked out front for the most part, yeah. It was pretty neat thought. It was a neat sight. Amazing experience with the fact that we had about nine staff members who just committed. And, you need to know that these staff members weren't getting paid. They were there because they wanted to be there. And they were very selfless. And the relationships that we gained with those strike teams in such a short amount of time was amazing as well. And we took a group picture, and we've got an amazing letter written by one of them just thanking us. But, I don't know – when people ask, how did you get this started? It just happened. And I think that goes back to what you'll find in small, rural, and agriculture-based communities. You know? Good people, who understand the importance of helping others. And who also have that determination and the will to pick themselves up and help themselves. So, I can't say enough about the people. The people. The people that live here. The people that helped us out. Because they came from the same areas that we come from – small, rural, and in agriculture.

Diane: So, what's your most vivid memory of the fire?

Jamie: Well, you know, it's all a blur. So, what's my most vivid memory? I wish I could answer that. I don't know if I can tell you what's my most vivid memory. I just am amazed about how we got through the week.

Diane: Did you see any of the flames? Remember the smell?

Jamie: I guess, if you're asking – probably when we were leaving that day. You know? Robin and I were probably two of the last people, because I hung around till the schools were all empty, and then we went back home. And so, I would say, just the haze – not the haze, but the smoke.



Diane: Did you get caught in the fire going east? Or were you through there before the fire actually...

Jamie: We were through there before it came. But, if I have to say what's my most vivid memory, I would say that would be leaving, and then seeing all the smoke come into Ashland not knowing exactly – I mean, I still didn't know the concept of what was going on. Because you hear the fire bell and you don't think anything of it. So, yeah, I would say it would be the smoke, and how it filled the community, or the City of Ashland.

Diane: So, your kids don't live here. Were they trying to get in contact with you? Did you have any trouble telling them where you were, or what was going on, or the rest of your family?

Jamie: You know, it's funny you say that because I don't think very many people outside the area knew what was going on.

Diane: Yeah. Unless they were on Facebook.

Jamie: Yeah. Yeah. But, we talked to our parents, and we talked to our kids, and we were always safe. We were always okay. We knew things were fine. But again, I think it goes back to, nobody really knew what was going on in Ashland, America during the time period. And, I don't know how many people really understand it today.

Diane: Yeah. So, what were some of your thoughts – well, but you came back from Dodge, so you didn't really see any of the burn until you got close to Ashland, did you?

Jamie: Correct. So, when we came from Dodge, you started seeing, probably closer when you got out to Gardner was really the scope of the fire, and how close it got to Garth's house, and the fields coming in. And really, it was just right outside from jumping the highway to the school or the new hospital. So, it really was just an unbelievable sight to see that.

Diane: So, did you grow up in a rural area and have some connection with wildfires before? Had you had much experience with fires?

Jamie: No, no. I haven't. I mean, I was born in Scott City, and I spent most of my childhood in Ness City. But, you know, it's not like it is here with the grassland.

Diane: It's a lot more farm land up there?

Jamie: Right. So, this would certainly be a once in a lifetime experience, we hope.

Diane: We hope so. So, who were some of the people, or agencies, that proved most helpful during the fire?

Jamie: Well, I think working hand-in-hand with Emergency Management was great. The Red Cross was amazing. You know, there were there that night. We called, and they were there. And even if you go back to Coldwater, I've never been in a situation where we've needed – as a person, the Red Cross. So, I guess that was kind of one of those surreal experiences. When I'm in Coldwater, I see people with Red Cross vests on, and we see these Red Cross cots in this gym, and our community members are sleeping on these. And you really understand, this is an emergency. These people, including myself, we can't go back to our homes. And so, at that point in time, you're like, this makes sense. You know, I connected the dots. And so, I guess that night, on Tuesday night we called; the Red Cross was there for us. So, the Red Cross was an amazing organization.

Diane: Where did they come from?

Jamie: That's a great question. I'd have to go back.

Diane: Do you have any idea?

Jamie: I do. I just am completely blank right now.

Diane: Would it be like, Wichita or Hutch, or further? Oklahoma City?

Jamie: I think it was closer than that.

Diane: I know Dodge City has Red Cross.

Jamie: Well, they had a trailer – I think it was somewhere back, not too far east. And maybe they just had the trailer there. But, I would have to go back and check, because we had to document everything for the Red Cross. But there were there. And they were there when we needed them.

Diane: Right. So, can you perceive of anything positive that came out of this fire?

Jamie: I would probably tell you what you've already heard, is that the renewed spirit of how people help people. You know, I like the way Mark Gardner put it. He said it's renewed his spirit in people. It strengthens what I already know about our community, in a small, rural, and agriculture community. You're not gonna find the response and the will everywhere that you see here. And so, again, I go back to yeah, it renewed your faith in people. Renewed your faith in where we live. And it brought out what is best in people, and that's helping others.

Diane: So, did you lose anything in the fire?

Jamie: We were lucky. We didn't lose – didn't have any damage. You know, we live here in the City of Ashland.

Diane: So, of all the people that experienced the fire, do you think it was more of a physical or financial or emotional effect on everyone? Or a little combination of all?

Jamie: I think, depending on who you were, you're gonna be impacted by it at different levels. I think it's all three. The most obvious is it's physical, because you're gonna see it. And certainly, if you're a rancher or you're a farmer, or you're someone that had property that was lost or damaged, it's financial. As a school district, you're probably gonna see a little bit of the impact on that because of the loss. And emotional – from the stories that you hear about people who were caught up in the fire, to the people who would go back and they were just emotionally drained because they didn't know if they'd lost their homes. And you know, when I was in Coldwater, you know, I'm standing next to Dr. Kilmer, and he thinks his house is gone, and his kids, and their animals. So, that's a rollercoaster, because at that point, they had lost all hope that their house and their animals were safe. And thankfully, they were all okay. But that's just one story. And then you go, and I talked to Hailey Walker and I think I didn't realize the emotional impact on just people until you talk to them, who actually have their homes out there in the country. And she was fine, but it was still an emotional rollercoaster. So, it's all the above, and it affects us all differently.

Diane: So, did you have a chance to go, kind of like, go look out in the country, and see maybe how your bus routes were impacted?

Jamie: So, Deb Pearce, Jason Endicott and I all went on Tuesday. We loaded up a vehicle with water because we had a lot of water that was being donated. And we just said, “We’ve got people out there. We want to get this to them.” And so, we ended up going all the way north up through Giles Ranch, saw the devastation up there, saw the loss of cattle, they were still out there. The park rangers and the vets were out there checking the animals. And we went all the way over to Englewood and dropped stuff. So we had the opportunity to go around the district and see the devastation first hand.

Diane: How did that affect you?

Jamie: You know, when you can just hear about it, it’s a lot easier to deal with than when you see it, and then it becomes real. And you understand that this fire is impacting people directly. And until you are out there and you’re seeing the loss, or the devastation, you don’t understand it. So, it opens your eyes and it makes you appreciate when we have things and things are going well, versus in times of need.

Diane: So, at the school, you’ve had several people, students, that lost their homes and stuff. Did you have extra counseling brought in for those students, or just deal with it in the classroom?

Jamie: So, for us, I think one thing that was beneficial is that next week was Spring Break. And that entire week, we didn’t have kids. And everybody was so caught up in rebuilding at that point. Even our kids. I would say the vast majority of our older kids probably had first-hand experience in going back out to the ranch to help friends, to help neighbors, or to help themselves. But we didn’t have any extra counselors brought in because we didn’t have school that week. And I really think that was probably the best thing that could happen is, we had this space between the incident, you have some of the rebuilding. And people know during that time or rebuilding, things are gonna be okay, and then getting back to school. And we did send out the message, and we talked to our staff on how we handle this. Because we didn’t know the kids were going to react. And we had the Iroquois Center come down, they provided some counseling for us. But, really, our biggest role, we didn’t do the mental health side, was just the physical donations and the meals for our families.

Diane: So, you kept having all these donations coming, and they didn’t stop the week after the fire. They kept kind of coming, although they probably weren’t coming to the high school anymore. What was some of your reactions to seeing a semi pull up with a whole load of water? I mean...

Jamie: My first thought was, how are we gonna unload these pallets? It’s just overwhelming because we didn’t have the manpower to unload them. And we would have to go get a forklift and unload them, and just stack the bottles of water on the side of the school, and then carry them in. And like I said, the other tractor-trailers that would come, we would send them to Englewood, I think a couple of them were sent over there.

Diane: So, what about the hay trucks? Did you see a lot of them coming?

Jamie: You know, after our role was done and we were able for me to kind of get back to running the school, yeah, it was pretty amazing to see all of the donated supplies that were coming to the school, or not to the school, but to the community. And some of the fence posts and some of the donate items were getting dropped off in our parking lot. We’d show up, and we would see these fence posts, or the supplies in our parking lot and we’d walk in, and we were like, “Okay, does anybody know who dropped this off, or where it’s going?” But it’s just amazing. It’s amazing.

Diane: It came from so many different places.

Jamie: It did.

Diane: So, were you able to attend the community dinner and service that they had at the school after the fire? Were you in town then?

Jamie: We were out of town for the community service.

Diane: Did they approach you about using the school for that? Or, how did they set – the ministerial alliance did that?

Jamie: Yeah. That's just something that's gone on for several years, or at least the last couple of years. And so, I thought it was very appropriate. We're here to help serve our community in any way we can.

Diane: So, are there any things that you can do, or have done, to prepare for a future fire or emergency?

Jamie: Well, I think that the school was left out in the very beginning of the emergency planning. And in my mind, the school should have been the number one place to go talk to. In small communities and large communities, schools obviously have multiple resources. And here in our community we have the ability to cook and serve. We have the facilities for people to stay, to clean themselves for hygiene, for recreation. I mean, really, we're the one stop. And so, I think Millie will talk to you in Emergency Management is that the school has to be engaged in the conversation of how or what happens next time.

Diane: Now you said, you and your wife went back home to get some clothes and stuff. Were there some other things that afterwards when you returned, it was, oh, we should have taken that with us?

Jamie: You know. I don't know if I would have said we should have taken that. I think that we knew that if anything we'd lost, we'd be able to get. Really, we were just trying – she was pretty panicked. And I just said, let's pack a bag, and let's grab some stuff, and let's just see where we end up. But, yeah, I think probably most of the people will tell you the same thing, because whatever we lose we'll be able to get back, whether it's pictures or other things.

Diane: So, what about the community? How can they prepare better for such an occasion again, or any kind of emergency?

Jamie: When we think of, how do we respond for something like the fire? It really, to me, is a state level issue. And it's about the resources we need. The small rural communities, and we have such limited resources, all of our guys were out fighting the fire, and all of our resources were being used. But the State needs to station more resources in the area so they can be utilized if we do have another emergency. I think that our Emergency management probably did the best they could do with what we have. It was just an overwhelming situation with how large the fire and how fast it was moving.

Diane: And the lack of resources, of other people coming in because of the number of fires that were in the area in the state.

Jamie: Right. Absolutely.

Diane: So, after this was all over, and Kansas Emergency Management Association had their annual convention, the school received an award there. Who nominated you, and how did you get that award?

Jamie: It was our Regional Homeland Security Director.

Diane: I think her name's Jeanette, or something.

Jamie: You know what? I can tell you. I feel so bad that I can't remember her name right now. I can get you her name. Let me get you her name.

Diane: Is it Jessica?

Jamie: No, no, no. Let's see. Millie will know. But, she nominated the school, and we were very fortunate. It was the Outstanding Service Award given to not just Emergency Management providers, but this really is supporting Emergency Management. And so, in our support role from providing the location and the ability for the strike teams to come in and sleep, and feeding them, and housing them, and letting them use our facilities, we received that award. So, we were very grateful. You know, I take very little credit at all because, people keep saying "you guys did a great job." And I hear the accolades, but I only did what I think anybody would have done. And if it wasn't for the staff members that came in and volunteered their time, we wouldn't have been able to do that.

Diane: And you mentioned you had to fill out paperwork for the Red Cross. Did you have to do any other paperwork, and what type of paperwork?

Jamie: So, they document everything, detail by detail. I mean, it is very itemized. When the strike teams would leave, they had to sign out. When they would come back, they had to sign in. They wanted to document for FEMA purposes everything that was going on. So, we had to come up with all the meals we served, and how much that cost us. And maybe even – well, not maybe even – but the costs that we could come up with with HVAC, and did our utility bills go up? It was a paper nightmare. But again, C.J. and Lexie Miracle kind of manned the front office and did all of that.

Diane: So, did the school have some increased costs because of their part in helping take care of people?

Jamie: We did. I mean, obviously the food cost, it was just gone. Whether or not we were gonna use it that week, you know, it still was gone. Our utilities did go up.

Diane: Markedly?

Jamie: Hmmm, it's hard to say. I mean, I guess it would just depend year to year based on the weather.

Diane: Because the weather was pretty nice that week, overall.

Jamie: Yeah. It was. It was. But it's hard, when you compare year to year, I think it was up a little bit. But again...

Diane: But you only had one building open at the time?

Jamie: Correct. But we also would have had school that week anyway. But the biggest thing, I think, is the fact that our labor costs, too. So, they have you track volunteer hours. And so, our labor costs for the volunteers, if we were paying them would have been pretty high.

Diane: So, do you kind of have a ball park number of how many volunteer labor hours there might have been?

Jamie: I do. If you can give me a minute, I will find that for you, because it's important to note.

Diane: So, like, you're talking maybe 6 or 8 people working in the kitchen every day, for each meal, or more?

Jamie: There were probably six, at some times more. You know, we all just jumped in and did what we needed to do.

Diane: So, you had teachers helping up there, too? Just not cooks, but other staff?

Jamie: I would say we had some teachers. But most of the people who volunteered were staff members. You know, when you really look at the teachers in the district, a lot of them were probably impacted at some point directly by the fire. But we did have some teachers. And we had mainly our staff. Our custodial staff was there. Our kitchen staff was there. Our office staff showed up. And then, you know, Deb Pearce drove the handicap bus several times to move the patients around. And Jason was there. So, it was – it was just a good corps of people that showed up to help.

Diane: And students, were they there most of the time?

Jamie: Yeah, we did have – it was – you know we don't have school, but we have students who want to show up to the school. And so, we put them to work, and it was really neat because when strike teams would come in, we would tell the students to show them what rooms to go into, and so they kind of acted as a guide. They helped to serve the food. They helped to clean up the kitchen. They even helped provide some recreation for them because they started to, again, by the end of the week, we had the strike teams come in and they would – you know, after the things got maybe slowed down a little bit then they would shower and clean up, and then they would spend some time in the gym. So, we had an amazing group of kids show up and help out, too.

Diane: A good experience for the kids to learn community service?

Jamie: Absolutely, you know. And I would say that this community service probably meant a little more than most other community service.

Diane: So, like they do Jay Day every year.

Jamie: Right. We do Green Jay Day.

Diane: Do you have some ideas for that from what you learned from the fire that might be helpful, for how the kids would respond? They do a good job of going out and cleaning up stuff.

Jamie: Yeah, they do. They do a really good job. I don't know if there's necessarily anything that – you know, I think our kids, during that fire, I mean that shows your true character. On Green Jay Day, or whenever you'd set a community service activity aside, they're doing it because it was set aside. And Green Jay Day really showed – people were doing this, not for recognition. They were just doing it because they knew it was right. And it goes back to everything that we've talked about. What really came out of the fire? Those types of moments came out of the fire, where people did things because it was good, and it was the right thing to do, and they wanted to do it. Not because there was any reason, other than it was selfless service. So, I think I might be close to finding that. I'm in April, I know.

Diane: So, did it take a long time to accumulate all those facts? And get all the hours and stuff, and get back with everybody that helped?

Jamie: Since it was documented so well, we had it.

Diane: You just had to compile it?

Jamie: Yeah, we did. We did. And I can read this letter, too, that I think is pretty valuable, from one of the firefighters.

Diane: Is that the one from the Montrose Fire Department?

Jamie: Yeah. Yeah. So, the letter that I sent out talks about our efforts at the school. And you know, it says, “We want to recognize staff members who spent their six days at Ashton High School,” which is **Alison McPhail, Rebecca Boyce, Juanita Incinios, Sarah Hamlin, Georgia Rushton, Scott Shippo, Brian Kraut, C.J. Miracle, Lexie Miracle, Deb Pearce and Jason Endicott**. And it says we “housed 111 firefighters on our busiest night, served over 600 meals each day, maintained the cafeteria with snacks and food for first responders on a 24-hour basis, collected and organized donations, and kept the building in working condition.” Let’s see, community service. I’m gonna go to a different document. Were you gonna ask me a question?

Diane: Did they use this kind of stuff as supporting documents for your KEMA award?

Jamie: They did. In fact, what I just read was part of the announcement, too. But we tracked our volunteer hours by students and staff, and community members. And I know that I have that documentation somewhere; I just can’t find it.

Diane: So, 1,000 hours or more?

Jamie: You know, it could be. Here it is, yeah. It’s over 1,000. So, it says, what we had documented, “Our total volunteer hours were 1,675 hours. 53 community members, 48 students, and 19 staff volunteered throughout the week.” So, pretty amazing. So, you can go back on our Facebook and look at all the pictures.

Diane: So, what did you learn about your staff from this little week’s worth of community involvement?

Jamie: Probably the same thing I’ve said over and over is, we have amazing people.

Diane: Was there anything that surprised you?

Jamie: I think I’ve already said it before. I just am surprised how it all came together because it wasn’t planned. It wasn’t planned. I mean, the school was not part of the first responders – for the emergency management response. And we became, in my mind, and I think what others would say, a pretty vital role in how we helped. And people just responded. And it just happened. And so, if you ask me how it happened, when it wasn’t planned, I don’t know how I can tell you that other than your question, and what did I learn? We just have people who care, and that’s really it. We have amazing people that care.

Diane: And you were very needed at that time.

Jamie: Yeah. Yeah, we were.

Diane: Very important.

Jamie: But, we didn’t know that.

Diane: Not until it happened. So, do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you’d like to share?

Jamie: My only thought is, you know, for anybody else in the time of need, ask what you can do. Always go find something to do. Ask what you can do. How can you help? I think that's probably my message – when you see there's a time of need, find out how you can help.

Diane: Sounds good. Is there anything else?

Jamie: No, you did a very good job. I appreciate it. That was very good.

Diane: Thank you for sharing your experiences.

Jamie: I'm sure I was just a mumbling, bumbling....

Diane: Not at all.