

Diana: Today is March 8th, 2018. What are your names?

Janae: Janae Wilson.

Charlie: Charlie Gibson.

Celia: Celia Gibson.

Chylynn: Chylynn Gibson.

Diana: Okay, where do you live?

Janae: Ashland, Kansas.

Diana: What is your occupation?

Janae: I am a registered nurse and work at a hospital in Dodge delivering babies. I'm also the wife of a rancher.

Charlie: I am a high school senior; I am 17 years old.

Diana: And you go to?

Charlie: Ashland High School.

Chylynn: I go to Ashland High School, I am a freshman, and I am 15 years old.

Celia: I go to Ashland High School, I am a 7th grader, and I am 12 years old.

Diana: Did we ask mom how old she was?

Janae: I am 39.

Diana: Okay, so we are each going to have to not talk on top of each other. So when did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as "the fire" in general?

Janae: The afternoon of March 6th, my husband Matt came home from work for lunch; he took a late lunch that day. Typically, he comes home from noon to one, but that day he came home about 12:30, and didn't leave the house until about 1:30, taking his hour lunch. He walked out to get in his vehicle and noticed it looked pretty hazy of to the west. So I walked out there with him when he was getting in his pickup and was like, "Oh my goodness, that's a lot of dirt, and lots of wind blowing."

So at that point, neither one of us knew that there was a fire going because we don't hear sirens. But Matt was like, "I think that looks like a fire, but I don't know. It could just be so much dirt." So he left, went into town to go on with the rest of his day at work, and I got some stuff together and had to go into town as well. I made it

there about a little after two and realized then that our fire department had been called out. I didn't know when they had been called out, and I found out then that the fire was south of Englewood somewhere in Oklahoma. Basically, that's how I found out about it, was going to town.

Diana: When you say you "go to town," where do you live from Ashland?

Janae: We lived 7 and a quarter miles east of Ashland; the address was 2706 U.S. Highway 160.

Diana: So you girls were all in school?

Charlie, Chylynn, Celia: Yes.

Diana: What is the first way that you heard about the fire?

Charlie: Well, I heard about the fire from my best friend Corissa, because she is always up with the news, it seems like. She was like... we had noticed that the sky was getting kind of orangey outside, and so I'm just like, "Hey, do you know what's going on?" and she said, "Oh yeah, the fire department had gotten called out. There is a fire that since the wind is up and keeps blowing real bad, we need to be aware of." But it didn't really seem super close. As the day went on, it kind of got darker, and you realized that you might need to be a little bit more worried about it, but at the time it just seemed like, "Oh no, I hope that someone's house doesn't get burned down, or that no one is seriously affected."

Diana: So where were you?

Chylynn: I was at school. I was going to my third-hour class, which was on the west side of the school. I just looked out the window, and I just saw smoke like everywhere on the whole west side, and that's how I found out because I knew immediately it was a fire, and I had heard the sirens.

Diana: At noon?

Chylynn: Not noon, it was earlier than that.

Janae, Charlie: When they called out the fire department.

Chylynn: When they called out the fire trucks I heard the sirens, and then the town sirens.

Diana: You can hear the fire trucks leave town when you're in the high school?

Chylynn: Yeah.

Diana: What class were you in?

Celia: Well, I really don't remember. I believe that I was at the grade school at that time. Then we went over to the high school because we had track, and that's where our track is. So I just heard from a couple of friends when we were about to leave the grade school, that there was a fire, and my teacher told us. She told us not to be worried, and we didn't have practice that day because all of the smoke was everywhere.

Diana: Do you remember what time they let out school? Was there an announcement?

Charlie: They announced early that there was the possibility... there is always that possibility that when you hear about disaster happening, and being a high schooler, you're like, "I wonder if they are going to let out school early, if we can go." It got to about...

Janae: I got that text message at 3:12.

Charlie: About 3:00 they announced over the loudspeakers that they were going to let out school early and that the out of town kids need to make sure to call their parents before they go home, because of how close the fire was. So all the out of town kids, or anyone who lived outside of the Ashland limits needed to call their parents before they left to make sure that either they were going to get picked up, or that it was safe for them to drive in the direction of their house.

Diana: So when you guys go to school, do you all go together, do you ride in one vehicle, or do you ride in one vehicle or do you ride the bus?

Chylynn: We did last year. It depended on the day, because Charlie and I had cheer in the mornings on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and Celia would ride the bus then, but we would all go home together.

Janae: They went home together that day though.

Diana: So you would find each other before you would leave school and go home.

Charlie, Celia, Chylynn: Yes.

Diana: And you were at a forensics meet?

Chylynn: I was at a scholars bowl meet, and it got canceled because of the wind in Ingalls, so I had left at 2:30?

Janae: It was closer to 2:45.

Chylynn: Yeah, we left at 2:45 because mom had come and signed off on some permission slip for Charlie.

Janae: And gave you money.

Chylynn: Yeah, gave me money to go eat whenever we came back through to go to Dodge, and so they had closed the highway to Minneola, so we had to go up though Bucklin, so we were almost to the curves. Well,

when I had walked out of the school, I had looked back, and me and my mom were both leaving at the same time, because she was going to go...

Janae: I had to go get fuel.

Chylynn: And then I was just going to the meet, so I looked up and I just saw the smoke, and you could see it going over the school already, and it was just like everywhere. I looked at Emily Berryman, she was on my team, and I looked at her and I said, "This is scary." I didn't say anything to my mom, I just said that I would see her later, I don't remember what I said. I just said, "I love you" and that I would see her later.

Janae: I told you, "Good luck."

Chylynn: Yeah. So we were to the curves, and our scholars bowl coach was on the phone with Mr. Endicott because they were kind of antsy about letting us go, but they finally just let us leave because they were just going to hold us and say that it wasn't safe for us to leave. And I wish they would have, but I couldn't have made that call.

Diana: So did you make it to the meet?

Chylynn: No, it got canceled because the power went out in Ingalls because of the wind.

Diana: Where were you?

Chylynn: We got told that we couldn't turn around at the Bucklin curves. So we weren't even to Bucklin when they said that we couldn't. They said, "Don't go back, it's too windy." The wind was almost blowing us off the road.

Diana: And where did you stay?

Chylynn: When we got to Dodge, we went to the mall and sat there and messed around for about an hour, until I called my mom and I said, "How bad is it?" and she said, "They ended school early." We didn't know, and that they, Charlie and Celia, were headed to the house, and that I had told her that we would probably just meet at another location if the town were to evacuate. So I said I might just go back on the bus. I called my grandma, and I said that if it got bad that I would stay with her. I told my mom, and she said, "That's a good idea, I would rather you stay up there." So I called my grandma, and she came and picked me up.

Janae: Grandma lives in Dodge.

Chylynn: So I went and stayed with her, and I was really scared. I knew that Emily didn't want me to leave either because she didn't want to be alone with all of the guys. I don't know; it's since we're so close, she wanted that sense of somebody.

Diana: So how many people are on the scholars bowl?

Chylynn: I don't remember how many people were there. It was maybe six? But we didn't... I don't really remember. It was probably six.

Diana: In a small bus or a van?

Chylynn: No, we weren't in a bus, we were in a van.

Matt: Oh, they are all in here?

Diana: Yeah. So when you guys left school, you had already been let out of school. Had you already heard that you had to evacuate too?

Charlie: No, we got let out of school at about 3:15. So at 3:15 when mom got the text, I was basically walking to the door to wait to meet up with Celia. Mom had called me and she was like, "Find Celia and get out to the house. Right now that is what you need to do. You need to find Celia, wait for her and then get out to the house pretty quickly."

Janae: But you argued with me because you were like, "Can't I just stay after?" Because homecoming was the next week and she wanted to get posters done because she is the cheer captain and wanted to work on that stuff. I said, "No, I need you out here, I need you to come home. Get your sister and head out to the house as soon as you can."

Diana: So where was Matt? Were you still working Monday afternoon say, 2:00? Were you in town?

Matt: I stayed at lunch. I was the first one to see what was going on. I went home for lunch, worked a little bit late, probably an hour late on my lunch. We were over at Protection doing some work, and it was like, 'Huh, this is not good.'" Got home, finished my sandwich, went back out to my pickup to go back to work and told Janae, "It's like the dirty 30's." Big dust cloud coming up, and then I saw the edge of it, and I was like, "That's not dust, that's smoke." So then I started making phone calls to people. Discovered that the fire was down in Englewood. Ran down there and pretty much just told my boss, I said, "We're not... we got a major event here, and I'm not working the rest of the afternoon." It just escalated from there.

Diana: So when you all got back to the house, was there other people at your house that had come out to...

Janae: No.

Diana: Not yet.

Janae: So after she left on the school bus at about 2:45-2:30 roughly, I don't know exactly when the scholars bowl team left. I left to go get fuel at the pumps on the west side of town and was filling up. I even took pictures that I have on my phone so that I could post that, "God this doesn't look good." Honestly, I'm not sure, but I want to say that this was at 2:45 in the afternoon. I was finishing getting fuel, and I noticed that Jule Hazen, which is our neighbor to the south of us, was driving by from the west going east very fast. He was speeding. So I thought, "Oh my goodness, maybe that fire is closer than what I thought it was or what we thought it was."

Matt: We didn't think that it was going hit us.

Janae: And we knew that he had cattle out to the west. I guess you could say north of Shaw's. County Road 16 roughly is what that area is. And I thought, "Oh goodness, if he is having to move cattle from there, it's getting really close. So I finished getting fuel and started heading back east, back home. Jewel must have turned off somewhere in town because as I was outside of town, he came up behind me like I was standing still and zipped around me going way fast, as if I was standing still. So I called him, and of course, he didn't answer, thankfully, because he was obviously on a mission. But I just continued heading home, and once I got home, he called me as soon as I was getting out of the vehicle. I said, "I noticed that you need some help. Are you guys moving cattle? Can I help you with anything, because obviously the danger is further to the west."

So he said, "No, I just needed a different vehicle because this vehicle had gas in it and it was going to be faster to grab this vehicle than it was to pump fuel and head back that way." Anyway, he said that he didn't need any help, but he said that fire was moving much faster and that they were trying to quickly move cattle. I was like, "Okay, if you change your mind and you need help, I am around, and I am not doing anything." So he hung up the phone, and I just decided that I was going to go ahead and hook up our sprinkler system and turn on the sprinkler system to our tree row. I walked out and turned that on and was walking back to the house, and Jewel Hazen called me back. This was maybe five minutes later, and he says, "Honestly Janae, you know what you could be doing is if your cattle are in the north pasture, the way this wind is blowing, I think you need to move them to your south pasture if you can get them there. Because of the way the wind is and the way this fire is moving, I think they would be better in the south pasture." So at that point, I hung up the phone and called Matt and was like telling him.

Matt: I was over at Chris's because the immediate danger was over there in Englewood.

Diana: And they live west of Ashland close to Acres?

Matt: Yes.

Janae: Chris Wilkinson...

Matt: So I had already driven down to Englewood and saw that it was threatening that area, and it was kind of going to the northeast angle, and I don't know if Chris knew about it yet, but Jesicka was there and we were contemplating what to do. So that's where I was when Janae was telling her part of this. Did they follow us when we left?

Janae, Diana: No.

Janae: They did not.

Diana: She said that she went to town and stayed at Chance's.

Matt: Oh no, I know. At that point, Big John came out there and told everybody to get out of there. So we went back to town...

Janae: Big John is the sheriff.

Matt: And at that point, I went back out to the house. I said, "Just in case, let's start moving our stuff here." But still I thought the way it was going, it seemed like it would be pretty far west of us.

Diana: So that is probably 3:30 or 4:00?

Matt: Yeah.

Chylonn: Yeah, well, it would have probably been more like 3:15 because we weren't home yet.

Janae: That's right, it probably was about 3:15.

Diana: So they hadn't started evacuating any of the town.

Janae: No.

Matt: But it was like, I don't know, it was spreading fast to the east too, even though it was from the north moving northeast. It was widening. So I thought, "Hmm, I don't know if the highway will stop it." It was moving so fast. Just in case we were putting stuff out; we had talked about tornado drills, and really this was no different. Just in case we started putting the stuff in the vehicles.

Janae: And Charlie and Celia made it home, and it was about 3:25-3:30.

Charlie: 3:25, because they dismissed school around 3:10-3:15. It took us about 10 minutes to get out to our house, and I was driving kind of slow because of the wind, but my car is an old boat, and I drove with Celia. I got to the house, and we were pulling up to the house. My mom came running out, and she was like, "You need to park over here in the gravel. Make sure you park over here out of the way of everything else. But make sure you park over here."

Matt: We were pulling a bunch of stuff away from the house that was flammable, common sense things.

Charlie: Celia and I got out of the car. My mom was like, "Ok, you need to go to the house and start packing like you would for a trip. Start packing just in case, and we will fill up the Suburban just in case we get evacuated." So Celia and I had been at the house for about 15 minutes, and Jesicka and Chris pulled up, and they were telling us... well, I guess they had called ahead, I don't know for sure when.

Matt: They wanted us to get out of there.

Janae: They had called ahead, and they were like, "We've been evacuated, Ashland is being evacuated, we need to go." So they ended up pulling up and...

Matt: I hadn't even went over to (??? garbled speech) at that point.

Diana: Were they coming to your house thinking they would be safe at your house?

Janae: At first they did, because when Jesicka finally did finally... when I did finally answer the phone when she called, she had asked, "We were evacuated from our house!" which was six miles west of Ashland, and then...

Matt: Southwest.

Janae: Yeah, but they got to Ashland and were hunkering down at Chances house which is within the Ashland City limits, and they were only there for maybe ten minutes? If that. And then they got the evacuation order for everyone to leave Ashland. That took them a little bit because they did also check on Bessie and loaded Bessie up with them, and that's Chances next door neighbor.

Matt: (Garbled Speech??) run over at that point.

Janae: Yeah, absolutely. And then when Jessica called me and said, "We're on our way to your house, and we're just going to wait it out there, you know, see what happens, I was like, "That's fine. We're just kind of gathering stuff right now. I'm packing a bag, Matt's packing a bag, we're getting valuable things out of the house and putting them in the vehicle and kind of trying to get a game plan in a sense."

Chyllynn: So at that time I was with my grandma. My grandma had just picked me up from the mall and we were driving to her house, which is across the whole town from the mall, so I remember calling my mom. She didn't answer and I remember calling Charlie after that. Charlie said, "Hey, do you want me to grab anything?" and so I said, "It's already that bad?" and she said, "Yes, it's moving very fast, so you need to tell me what you want." So I said to grab all of my clothes and make sure I had enough underwear.

Charlie: I could get the clothes! I meant like pictures or special items.

Chyllynn: Sentimental items that I needed. So I said I had a shoe box in a tote under my bed full of just my pictures that I had from my whole life and a bunch of stuff that I thought was sentimental. And then I had two quilts and some wall quilts... I don't know what you call...

Janae: Wall hangings.

Chyllynn: Yeah, wall hangings. And I said, "If you could, grab my... and then I had a lot of stuff in my bedside tables." So I told her to grab my jar of money and then I told her to just grab anything that she would think that I would want.

Matt: Other than all that?

Chyllynn: Yeah.

Diana, Janae: Everything!



Charlie: Of course not everything was gotten.

Matt: I focused on documents that you can't replace.

Janae: Taxes, pictures.

Diana: Birth certificates.

Janae: Yes.

Matt: And we went from there to pictures.

Diana: And did you go get stuff out of the other house?

Matt: Yes. That's where I went, was to the other house. We kind of had a lot of that stuff in totes already. At this point, my truck was completely full of stuff.

Diana: So had you done anything with your cattle or your horses?

Matt: No. Janae had asked me what to do, but we don't have a wheat pasture that was green wheat. There was some fallow wheat that Chet Bratcher had done, but, it was kind of grassy. So I was like, "At this point, we really don't have anywhere to move them, because all your moving is from one pasture to another, and..."

Janae: Their chances are going to be...

Charlie: Just as slim.

Matt: As big as that fire is, there's literally nothing you can do. It's just like, well, you hope for the best.

Charlie: And with the traffic, you couldn't get them across.

Matt: We gotta hope for the best, I mean, because I'm saying if we had done that, they would have died and it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Because we would have been moving them right where it burned. Every acre of our ground burned. Every single acre. So it really wouldn't have mattered.

Diana: So when did you start noticing people driving by? Did they start about the time you got home?

Janae: When Chris and Jesicka showed up at our house, it was like almost a constant line.

Charlie: And it was all fast too.

Janae: It was all... like every three seconds, a car would go by. Which typically it's like maybe every hour and a half you see a car go by.

Matt: No.

Chylynn: Maybe a little bit more than that.

Janae: I am there during the day when there is not that much traffic on that highway.

Chylynn: Not during the day, but at the end of the day it's more heavier than that.

Janae: Right.

Matt: Every 5-10 minutes there is a car that goes by.

Charlie: Maybe towards like 5:00 or early morning.

Diana: So what all vehicles did you decide to load up and take.

Matt: As many as we could grab.

Janae: We loaded up my Suburban. We loaded up his white Ford pickup that's a four-door. We loaded up the red feed truck, and those were the three vehicles that we loaded up and decided to take. When Jesicka and Chris arrived, they were in their green, extended cab pickup and their brown Charger. With me having the two girls, and having more room in the Suburban, we decided that Jesicka would jump in and drive the Suburban with Charlie and Celia and Bessie, and they would park their Charger in front of Charlie's car in our gravel, and leave the Charger at our house.

Matt: We left my work truck, it's insured.

Janae: Charlie's car.

Matt: Charlie's old car. But we pulled them out onto the rock to where they weren't next to the grass. Ironically, they all survived.

Diana: So which way did you decide to go? Did you go to Coldwater, or did you decide to go to Bucklin?

Janae: We decided to head north to Bucklin.

Matt: We didn't decide, we were told to.

Janae: Right. So when Jesicka and Chris arrived, of course, everything was getting very chaotic. It kind of seemed like Matt and I were like an old working unit, working together on, "You grab this, I'm grabbing this."

Matt: You could see it. It was already almost north of us, and kind of like, "How's that going to work."

Diana: So you were thinking that it was the fire from the southwest that was going up there to the north of you? You are not aware that there is this other fire coming yet?

Janae: No.

Matt: Well, no. Because the wind switched.

Janae: So in the process of Matt and I getting everything together and buttoning, I guess you could say for lack of a better term, everything up outside and taking stuff that is flammable away from the house. We had our camper parked alongside our house and it was set up to stay in. Well, we decided to move the slides in and kind of get it ready to just to hook onto and leave if we needed to.

Charlie: Just in case.

Janae: Just in case. It was not our intent to do that at that point. So we're finishing gathering stuff up, Chris and Jesicka show up, and Chris is like, "We gotta go, we gotta leave, we gotta leave now, hurry up grab whatever you have and let's go."

Diana: He was a little bit more excited than you guys were?

Janae: He was way more excited. And Chris was like... Matt was like, "I still gotta go up to the white house to get the important stuff up there." So he jumped in his pickup and ran up to the white house to get all of that stuff. Jesicka came inside and was helping me finish packing bags, and putting in different things and pictures. She was like, "Did you get your marriage license?" "No, I didn't." Thank God she reminded me; so I grabbed that.

Matt: Yeah, they don't have that at the courthouse.

Janae: Well they do, but it was like you just don't think of those things. So finally, Chris has reached his limit of being willing to wait because of all the line of vehicles going by, and was like, "We're leaving." He was getting very angry and antsy and saying some not so nice... he sounded like a sailor. Not so nice words, and was like, "I'm leaving." So Jesicka was like, "Well, you can't leave without us."

Chylynn: He was nervous.

Janae: So Chris jumped in his pickup, we got all of the girls loaded up, I finally grabbed the last thing out of the house. I took one last look from the kitchen and was like, "I think I can live with what I've got." Needless to say, that was the last time I did that.

Diana: Did you take any pictures?

Janae: We did. We did grab pictures at the last minute.

Diana: But did you take any pictures?

Janae: No, and I wish I really would have.

Matt: Just not something we were thinking of.

Janae: We weren't taking pictures at all.

Matt: I'm thinking at this point, "Aw man, I gotta unload all this stuff."

Chyllynn: Haha yeah, that has happened multiple times with all of the tornado warnings.

Janae: Right, so we leave the house. Jessica, Bessie, Celia, and Charlie jump in the suburban. Chris jumps in his vehicle. I jump into the red truck, and as we were walking out, Jessica and I were walking together, and she goes, "I really think we should hook up to the camper." So I said, "I agree, I think we should too." And she said, "Then do it." I said, "I think I can get it done within the next few minutes." I'm pretty good.

Charlie: You asked me to help make sure you were lined up.

Janae: Right. So Jessica got in the Suburban and started backing out, I got into the red pickup and just pulled forward like I was going to go out of our drive and then backed up to the camper, and it made Chris extremely mad. He jumped out of his pickup and proceeded to call some pretty profane names to me. He was not happy with me at all. So I yelled back at him saying, "This is my only chance, it will take me less than a minute to hook up, you go on, we will catch up with you." So I continued backing up. Charlie just stood back there, I was lined up perfectly, and she told me when to stop. I stopped, I got out, I hooked it on, raised the hitch and we left. I'm not kidding you; it was less than a minute that it took to do that.

Chyllynn: I remember getting back, and mom told me about like...

Matt: And I'm coming back...

Chyllynn: And they pulled out, mom had said that they pulled out right when Matt was coming back, so Matt was right behind them when he was coming back from the white house. I was just surprised because now I know if we're ever in a situation, tell mom to back up the trailer because she will get it her first try.

Charlie: It was perfect timing. So we decided since hers was the biggest vehicle and we had the most stuff, and we didn't have time to hook up the stabilizers or anything. So mom decided to go first since she had the biggest vehicle.

Janae: I had the pickup, the one-ton feed truck.

Charlie: So you went first, and then...

Janae: Matt was behind me...

Charlie: No Chris. Chris was behind them in the...

Janae: Suburban.

Charlie: No, that was us.

Celia: Chris was in his truck.

Diana: Yeah, and you caravanned it to the Sitka corner and turned north?

Janae: And turned north to go to Bucklin.

Diana: And how far did you get?

Charlie: We were driving, and I was running phones. I had Jesicka's phone, I had my phone, and I had Celia's phone because you had your phone.

Matt: That's too detailed.

Charlie: No, it's not. I was running phones and making sure everyone stayed together because at that point the wind and everything was just so bad that you could barely see. So I was trying to make sure that everyone was together still, and at that point, someone had gotten a call, I don't remember who...

Janae: Jesicka.

Charlie: But I didn't answer her phone, but the call was from Bucklin.

Janae: Judge Freelove called Mel, and told them that they got stopped and couldn't go any further north, and that they had to turn around and go back towards Coldwater through the Lexington area.

Matt: Turned out to be a good thing because that's where all of the tragedy happened.

Diana: If you would have gone back south.

Chylynn: If you would have kept going, you would have not been able to go because there was the wreck.

Janae: Right. So Mel called Jesicka.

Charlie: So I answered for Jesicka and was like, "Okay, hey, what's up? What's going on?" And she was like, "You need to make sure you turn to Protection. Do not go to Bucklin."

Matt: So we turned at the Lexington road.

Charlie: We were not even a mile from that.

Matt: We were just right there.

Charlie: We were like 500 feet from that turn off from the Bucklin road to Protection.

Diana: So you had really just gone through the curves.

Janae: We had already gone... Yeah.

Charlie: Mom was first, and she had that big camper not even 500 feet from that turn-off, and I was like, "Celia, you need to call Mom and tell her to turn now, like, you have to turn."

Matt: We had no idea what was going on.

Diana: Why are they turning?

Janae: Why are we slowing down, why are we turning?

Diana: Were you seeing smoke and fire in the north now?

Matt: There was smoke everywhere. I mean it was just hazy.

Diana: Was it that black stuff?

Celia: It was pitch black.

Charlie: Hmm, not quite yet. It was still that brown.

Diana: Can you see the person in front of you?

Matt: Yeah.

Charlie: We could see a bit of the person in front.

Celia: We could see the person in front of us.

Diana: So then you went to Protection, and had they already evacuated Protection when you got there?

Matt: Yeah, they were like, "What are you doing here? Get out of here."

Diana: So you went through Protection and then went on your way to Coldwater. When you got to Coldwater, where did you stop?

Celia: We stopped at the gas station.

Diana: On the south side of Coldwater?

Janae: On the south side of Coldwater across from Dollar General.

Charlie: Because that's where Mel and Bill had stopped, and somebody else was already there.

Janae: Rita and Joe.

Matt: We were running pretty low on gas too.

Chylynn: And then at that time, I remember, the whole time I was constantly either on the phone with someone already in Coldwater... I was texting someone in Protection, like I felt like I was there through a phone. I wasn't really there, but...

Diana: But you knew what was going on.

Chylynn: So I knew exactly what was going on. At that time in Dodge, there were fires in South Dodge, and it was scary, because the way the wind was blowing, it was going to go and get the whole southwest part of Dodge. They were scared that the Starbuck Fire was going to go up to Bucklin or Minneola...

Matt: It would have.

Chylynn: And it would have, yes, and I was just scared because there were fires down where I live, and then there were fires up in Dodge where the whole rest of my family lives. So I was like, "Great. This is just perfect."

Diana: So you get over there to Coldwater, and there are these other people, and everybody as a different story and they are coming. So did you go eat? Did you stay right there?

Matt: No.

Janae: We stayed there...

Matt: We talked about it but saw the smoke, and then the wind switched. But you couldn't tell if it had switched exactly opposite, but I made the comment, I regret this comment, I said, "That might be a good thing because then it will blow back on itself and they could get it out. Well, it didn't switch directly back, it switched at like a 45-degree angle, and that is what got us.

Diana: And when the wind switched, did it also get colder?

Charlie, Matt, Janae: Yes.

Janae: It was extremely cold.

Charlie: I remember we were all sitting there, and we had kind of gotten off together, made sure everyone was together, and then different people would kind of go out to the school where they had set up the...

Janae: Red Cross.

Charlie: Yeah, the Red Cross, like a relief center, it was kind of just a meeting place for the people. They kind of set everything up, and then we were kind of getting people stopping by, saying, "Hey, how are you guys? We just came from there." It got to the point where everyone was still trying to figure out what was happening. I remember just going up and just sitting on top of the camper and just watching the smoke. I'm just sitting there for 15 or 30 minutes and just watching it slowly get darker and darker, and I remember seeing the moon just get slowly covered with smoke. It got cold after the wind switched and it was just like, "I don't want to sit out here anymore, I'm going to go down." Around that time, all of us had decided... because you had already left, most of the guys had already left, and it was mostly...

Celia: I remember looking across the road, and we went to the general store, and we got some like crackers and stuff.

Janae: Water.

Celia: And water...

Diana: Snacks to kind of eat while you were waiting. Did you expect to go back home that night?

Charlie: Not that night, but yeah.

Matt: Couldn't know much of that.

Charlie: Hoping things would go well. Just the way that it sounded like it was going, it would have been ok. Then kind of about 15 minutes after it had gotten cold, Celia and I were there, Nicole Brown, and then like two or three older couples there. Bessie was with us.

Janae: Mell and Bill, and Rita, and Mike Freelove.

Charlie: So we decided that most of the news was going to the school and we wanted to know what was going on, so we were going to go to the school. So we ended up at the school, I think we took the Suburban. We left the camper?

Janae: No I followed in the camper.

Charlie: So we went to the school because that's where all of the news was going. I remember getting to the school and meeting with a bunch of other classmates that were there. I remember seeing some of the Gardiners, like the little kids. Just most of the people that had evacuated Ashland were meeting and congregating at the school. So we got there and it was still light. All I remember was just that you kept getting news saying, "Oh well, these people's house got burned down, their land was lost, something else was gone." And you never knew for sure what was true, because you know how rumors spread when things are happening. We heard that the Kellenberger's had burned down for sure, like it was a for sure thing that Kellenberger's house was gone, which it is right on the outskirts of Ashland. So that freaked out a bunch of the younger kids. Gardiner's was for sure gone.



Chylynn: The only thing I knew for sure was that the Gardiners, the firemen were there on that side of town and that that's the only place I knew for sure hadn't burned down. I knew for sure that it was there, and then I heard that it was by the Kay's new house. Then I heard that it was on that side burning into Ashland, then I heard it was at the Kellenberger's house, and then I heard that it was at the Methodist Church, and I was like, "Oh my God," and I just broke down and I was praying. Then I would call my friends, and they were all at Dave's in Coldwater, and they were like, "We're here for you, Chylynn," and right then they heard, "Well, your house is burned down." That's the first people that I heard it from, and they didn't know for sure.

Diana: So how were they stopping people from going back to Ashland? Was there a policeman sitting down there on the five-mile corner?

Matt: No.

Diana: So what made you decide to go see what was going on?

Matt: Probably stupidity. I couldn't stand it.

Charlie: All of the rumors constantly.

Matt: And when all those emotions are going through your head. Your cattle, your house... everything. It's like... that's a hard feeling to fight.

Diana: I'm too far away and I need to be closer?

Matt: Well, I don't know what I thought I could do, or anything, but I just had to know in my head because all these rumors were flying around. I knew it probably wasn't the best decision to make, but me and Chance were able to make it all the way back and forth. The only happy thing... well, the happy thing actually was that we discovered that Chris's house hadn't burned.

Diana: Oh, you went clear over west of Ashland?

Matt: We went clear over there.

Diana: Going mostly back roads and stuff. You probably drove by a lot of fire still?

Matt: There was a lot of smoke, it was just hot spots, but it was still smokey and it was hard to breathe. The most dangerous thing was all of the power lines laying across the road. That was... if you didn't see that you could have... It wasn't a good decision on our part, and we shouldn't have done it. If I had to do it all over again, I probably wouldn't have done it. It's that's a hard feeling to fight. Not knowing. It's just, I can't describe it.

Chylynn: You have to be there. You feel like you're going to do something.

Matt: I don't know what I'm going to do, but I feel like I gotta do something.

Chylynn: You feel helpless that far away. That's how I felt that whole night because I remember calling Charlie, she didn't answer, calling Matt, he didn't answer, calling my mom, she didn't answer. I remember...

Janae: You called Celia and she answered.

Diana: Is she the one that told you that your house was gone?

Celia: No.

Janae: We didn't know at that point.

Celia: I didn't even know. I was the last person to find out.

Chylynn: I didn't want her to find out from anyone over the phone, so I said, "How are you?" I was just worried about Mom and Charlie.

Diana: You were talking to them a whole bunch, right?

Chylynn: It hit me when my grandma said, "You need to call Celia."

Celia: She did, and I answered

Chylynn: So I said, "How are you?" and she just started crying.

Charlie: We kind of got separated from...

Chylynn: She said she couldn't find Mom. She just started crying because Matt had left with Chance and that she didn't know where they went. She knew that they were trying to figure out if they had... they were going to go find out for sure if we had lost everything, and she said, "I'm scared, Chylynn," and I said, "I am too."

Diana: So were you at the school?

Janae: Yeah, we were all at the school.

Chylynn: She was just scared, and she couldn't find Mom and she was just all by herself. I don't know if she was with anybody.

Celia: I wasn't with anybody. I was with my friend Caleb, and we were both in there, and we were just hanging out. I was with Britt, Caleb, and Cord.

Diana: So did you drive by your house when it was on fire?

Matt: I didn't get to go on the highway. Couldn't go over there, so I didn't get to see if it was on fire or not. The furthest that I was able to go was... Mike Koehn??? and his wife were stopped there and you could see on over the hill there, you could just see black rising. I asked the sheriff deputies, I don't know which ones were there

at that point, but I asked, "Did those houses on the highway, did they make it or not?" and he goes, "As far as I know right now... I'm sorry." It sucked, but until you see it, you still have that...

Janae: You're like, "Oh, it can't be gone."

Charlie: Like there is something left. There has got to be something left.

Matt: We were able to make it all the way to Chris's on the back roads because the highways were just locked down. Couldn't go. So we were pretty happy about Chris's house surviving. So we made it all the way back to Coldwater. We probably weren't very popular at that point, but we all went to bed. Then we ran out of propane in the middle of the night when it was freezing. I thought Chris was turning the thermostat down. So they were all like, "Get some propane!" It was like 5:00 in the morning at this point anyway, so I was like, "I gotta see." I was by myself at this point and the highway was open.

Diana: So what time did you go back?

Matt: It was first light?

Diana: Sun up?

Charlie: It was like as soon as we could.

Janae: We got the okay at 7:30 when they officially lifted the ban that you couldn't go back to Ashland. They had said that yes, you could start returning to Ashland at 7:30 in the morning. At that point, we were almost completely ready to get loaded up in the vehicles and head back to Ashland.

Matt: Yeah, well, I drove by and there was still power lines and stuff laying on the highways. You couldn't just go. I drove by the white house first. It was kind of surreal because you have this image in your head of what it looks like, and then you see that. You're just like...

Charlie: Where did it go?

Matt: The barn was still there, and the shop in the back that my dad built was still there. The house was gone and two or three other structures were gone. It was still smoldering with flames and stuff and the propane lines were still shooting out. I was just like... And like the porch support railings was... It was like, "Whew, yeah, this is no joke."

Diana: Got pretty hot?

Matt: So I kept going and then I saw our house. The Wilson sign was still there, and all I saw was, it looked like Godzilla had stomped on it, well, fired on it first and then stomped on it. But it missed the Wilson sign. The only thing I noticed that really caught my sight was the propane thing was just like shooting flames twenty feet in the air. I was like...

Charlie: He sent pictures of that right after...

Matt: I don't even know if I can describe what I felt at that point, because it just kind of felt numb. You knew. You could see with your eyes, it wasn't ?????calculating???? It was just a visual, and you are just going... So then I turned around and I go in the pasture and I started looking for the cattle. I see one immediately, kind of over there by the water tank, close to the brown house. All the way from its body, down to its hooves look like it was just burned off. I thought, "Oh my God." I keep going, I see a dead calf, keep going, see a dead cow. Then Janae calls me.

Janae: Wondering where he was at.

Matt: She goes, "When are you coming back? We're cold! We NEED propane!"

Janae: It was cold!

Charlie: It was FREEZING!

Celia: It was so cold.

Matt: I said, "You can't be calling right now! I'm about to break down and I've got dead cows and I'm freaking out!" Wasn't her fault, it was just the moment and how it was. I kept going back and pretty soon, here come another cow and here come another cow. But they all had that look and I was like, "Aww dang, I'm going to have to shoot these." I kept going, and I got a little closer, and some of the calves were bouncing around like they were happy, and I was like, "They're burnt, they can't be acting like that." and they were nursing and stuff. I got to looking, and it was mud. They had gone over there, north of my parents home, there is a couple of big ponds, and they were full at the time. Now I didn't know this, but that's where they went. They went over there and got out of that fire, because it was grazed down pretty hard and there was that fallow wheat pasture to the northwest, and it blocked it enough to where somehow they managed to get over there, but the horses...

Janae: We had a hundred head. We had a hundred head of momma cows.

Matt: I think we lost six cows and five calves. It was very low compared to that our herd was 100 pairs and two horses. Now they still had some burned stuff on their backs, but Kellenberger went out there and checked them out, and he said that they didn't look like they had been in any fire. It was a miracle. It was a miracle. I couldn't believe it. We had just bought these, and we didn't have any insurance on them. If we had lost that, our insurance that we used to pay for our house, we would have had to use to pay the bank off, and we would have just...

Diana: Would have been the R.V.?

Matt: Oh, it's not paid off either.

Charlie: We would have lived nowhere.

Matt: We went from being okay to being in financial straits.

Diana: So did you get propane back to them, or did they show up?

Janae, Charlie, Celia: Nope.

Matt: We ended up leaving.

Janae: We ended up just getting up and moving around. Getting extra clothes on and buttoning everything up and just going back.

Matt: It was tough. I mean I got that ranch sign made for my dad. My dad died trying to get it back on its feet. We put all that work into it; it's just a lot to swallow all at once.

Diana: So you really didn't have time to worry about the house, because it's gone. You have got to worry about your cattle, right?

Matt: Yeah, I mean the house is gone. You knew that without a doubt, which not saying it lessens the bite, but we have a camper, and I'm sure we could live with family for awhile, you know, till we could figure that out.

Diana: So what did you do with the cattle?

Matt: Well...

Janae: The immediate concern was hay and water. I called my dad; I had called my parents the evening before. I think Matt called me at about 11:00 that night.

Matt: That one guy that you knew from Protection brought the hay first, and then your dad showed up. We were able to get them hay immediately that next day.

Janae: First thing that morning.

Matt: One of the tanks was still working, so they had water. It's crazy because they didn't even act like anything had happened.

Janae: They didn't even try to get out. They just hung out by the ponds.

Matt: The fences are gone.

Janae: And then they worked their way over to the water tank.

Chyllynn: All they care about is food, so I don't think they would have gone anywhere, because that's where they get fed all the time.

Matt: We ended up, later, moving them all into the corrals, because there was a couple pens in there that we could at least capture them in. The electricity was gone, so it was, I mean we had immediate needs.

Diana: Is the water tank electrical, or solar?

Janae, Matt: It was solar.

Diana: Did it burn the solar parts?

Matt: That one tank in particular, that I'm telling you about, was supposed to burn, but it did not.

Janae: No, it didn't

Matt: But all the rest of them were gone, we had to replace all the rest of them. And I think just because it had been grazed down so much around it. I had a leak that I hadn't fixed, so there was water dripping on the ground.

Janae: It had its own moat.

Matt: My laziness just turned out to be a blessing.

Diana: A blessing, yes. And then you got the propane tank shut off so you're not spewing propane?

Matt: I didn't touch that. I was like "I'm not going near it."

Diana: Did it just run out?

Matt: The co-op people came and did that. I know it was full too, and it went for a couple of days, but I was like, "I'm not going near that thing. What if it just blows up? I don't know." So it just looked like Iraq over there.

Celia: That's not funny.

Janae: No.

Diana: So, each of you, what's your most vivid memory of the fire?

Celia: Um, I have two. Whenever I found out that the house was burnt, right by the bathroom in the high school in Coldwater. Mom told me that it was gone and we were never going to get it back. That moment I never want to relive again. And when we were driving back; it was really devastating.

Diana: Everything was black, right?

Celia: Yes, I was with my aunt, and I didn't cry.

Diana: Were you kind of shocked?

Celia: I was a lot of shocked. She started to tear up, and I didn't do anything. I was just... it was like, "This isn't real. Somebody pinch me and wake me up." When we finally went into town, I realized that my mom was all alone.

Janae: That's okay.

Diana: You mean you girls went to town and your folks stayed out at the house?

Janae, Charlie, Celia: No.

Celia: She was driving by herself.

Diana: Oh, she was the only one in a vehicle.

Janae, Charlie, Celia: Yes.

Janae: I was driving the camper in the red truck, and Matt was still in his white truck, but he... I don't... He had been going back and forth, so he had already kind of seen it, and he was by himself anyways, and when we loaded back up to go to Ashland, we just kind of all assumed the same positions as how we came to Coldwater. So the girls were in the Suburban with Jessica and Bessie, and I was in the red truck with the camper.

Charlie: I was with Chris.

Janae: That's right, you jumped in the vehicle with Chris.

Charlie: Because Chris was going back earlier. Chris was like the second one going back. And I was like, "I want to go."

Chylynn: That's how I was, but I was with my grandma. That night before, I remember Mom and Matt both calling my grandpa and saying, "We need hay tomorrow, if you can come down and give us as much hay as you have, please do it, and we will give you hay, or we will find a way to pay you back, but we need it tomorrow if we have cows." Then I knew everything was gone. I called my mom, and she said that Matt had gone, and I said, "You need to find Celia, and you need to give her a hug or something because she is all alone." She said, "I'm sorry, but I can't right now." So I said, "Why?" and she said, "Chylynn..." and she just started crying. She was trying to hold it in and I knew because she never cries. She is hard-headed and strong. She won't cry unless it is bad. My grandma, she was sitting there, and she just looked and looked away, and I knew that mom was going to say that we had lost everything, and she did. So I said I needed to call my dad because I needed somebody besides my grandma, who was showing me magazines of houses that we could build.

Diana: You weren't there yet?

Chylynn: No! And I was like, "Grandma, I don't need to be looking at house magazines right now, while my house is being burned down." She was like, "Honey, you just gotta plan ahead." I was like, "Grandma! Stop!"

Janae: She was just trying to distract you.

Chylynn: She didn't know what to do, because she...

Charlie: Didn't know how to react, too.

Chylynn: You don't do anything. My aunt was gone, we were at my aunt's house. She was tending people that were in Dodge that had lost their houses. I called my dad, and I said, "You need to come to my Aunt Jerica's house, now, please. So he said, "Okay." It was like 8:30. So he got there, and he lives three miles, no four or five miles out of Dodge, and he got there in two minutes. I remember meeting him outside, and my grandma was like, "Your dad is here," and I just ran to him and I said, "We lost everything," and he said, "It's going to be okay sweetie." And I said, "No, it's not."

Charlie: I think that my most vivid memory was, I was walking around because I don't like to sit still. I remember that night, the last thing I grabbed out of the house was my Bible. At that point in time, I'd been trying to go through and read the whole thing, and I was struggling with it. So I just had sticky notes with me to write things down, and so I had my Bible with my little pad of sticky notes and I was walking around, just trying to talk to people, trying to figure out anything that I could do.

Then I saw Jesicka, and I saw a bunch of our family all around the table where we had decided to set up camp in the lunchroom. Jesicka had started calming down and there was a bunch of people right around mom and I was just like, "Something's happened, something's wrong."

So I walk over and Mom had just gotten off the phone, and I remember that she looked up at me, and she says... and I'm just like... I don't remember if I said anything or not, but Mom looked up at me and she just started shaking her head. I just kind of walked away. I didn't want to be around any people. I knew my best friend was right there, well, she wasn't right there, but I had walked away, down into where a hallway was, and there were less people and I could kind of just be alone. I leaned against the wall and tried to not cry. I went there and Corissa followed me, and she was like, "What's wrong?"

I remember that as soon as she asked, I just started crying and saying, "We lost our house." So she gave me a big hug, and then she went back and she went and got my boyfriend Michael, and I just couldn't stand sitting still anymore. So I was finally like, "I'm going to walk around." So I walked around, and then I went outside, and Michael met me outside, and I just started bawling. I lost it, and he gave me a hug and said, "It will be okay, you have people here for you, it will be okay." Then he left me alone for a little while, and I still had my Bible in my hand, and I was just like, "I need to do something, give me something to do." So I went and at that point, the Red Cross people had brought in cots for people who needed to stay, so I was like, "Give me something to do." And I kid you not, I swear, out of the fifty-some cots that they were setting up in the library, I set up at least half of them.

Diana: You had to do something.

Charlie: I can't dwell on this, or I'm going to start bawling again, and I don't want to cry, so I'm going to do something with it. So I helped set up those cots, and I didn't want to be around anybody for sure, but I



remember that people that knew me like the Bakers, Austin Baker came up and gave me a hug. Gage Gardiner, Corissa was with me the whole time. I don't know; it was just one of those things. And then my dad called. I remember him calling, and it was right before we started setting up cots and it was like, "I need to do something. Tell me stuff I can do."

So he was like, "Charlie, you need to pray, so start praying." So I remember standing while we were doing stuff that it didn't take a lot of thought to do, because setting up those cots was easy, and I remember just praying and thinking, "Let something good come out of this. I don't want our loss to be something that keeps us down. I want something to come out of this." Just from the time that I was told that we lost the house... Then Mom came up to me, and she was just like, "Charlie, I know we lost the house, but I don't know what to tell Celia." She hadn't found out yet. You were playing with someone.

Celia: I don't remember who.

Charlie: You were with someone.

Celia: I was playing with a dog actually.

Charlie: And I looked over and I saw you, and you were still smiling and still happy with some stuff, and I know you were worried, but I was just like, "I don't know if she needs to know just yet." So I remember saying, "Let's wait to tell her just a little bit, and we'll make sure somebody else doesn't know." Because I remember walking around, and people would come up and hug me, and I would be like, "Make sure Celia doesn't find out yet."

Chylynn: I had called her a little bit after that, and that was when she had said that she was scared and that she couldn't find Mom, and that she alone.

Charlie: I was gone because I was walking. I couldn't stand still right now, so I'm going to go do something.

Diana: So what is your most vivid memory of the fire?

Janae: I would have to say that the very first one of the fire, is when we pulled out of our driveway, and I was kind of the leader of the pack, I guess. I knew where everyone was except for Chylynn because at that point I thought she was still with the scholars' bowl kids. So I called my mom, and I couldn't hardly talk to her, because I was bawling. I said, "We evacuated our house, but I need you to go and find Chylynn or call her or something. I need you to pick her up so that she is with family, because we have all left and evacuated, and I don't know if we will be able to come back."

And that one, because I was by myself in the pickup, driving the camper, and then Mom was calm and collected and was, "Yeah, that's fine. I'll go get her." Then, the next most vivid memory is coming back the next morning. We headed south out of Coldwater, and at that point, I had been on the phone with Heidi Hazen. She had called me and said that they had hay coming, and didn't know if we needed hay. Just letting me know that if we needed anything, I could call her and she would be happy if we needed a place to stay. Anything.

I just told her that that would be great and that I would call her once I found something out. I said, "I don't even know yet. I have yet to see; I don't even know what's there." Then I got off the phone with her, and I sat there and realized that I'm going to be driving into like possibly seeing nothing left, by myself, and I was kind of scared to do that. I didn't really want to face that by myself. I thought of the only thing I could do, which was call my brother, who lived out in Washington State at the time. I said, "I know you're probably not going to want to do this, but I need someone to talk to as I'm going through what I'm about to see." He said, "What do you mean?"

And I said, "We're headed back to Ashland from Coldwater, and I'm by myself, and I don't want to see it by myself. I know you're not here with me, but you're here with me, and I know you can't see what I can see, but at least I know that someone's there that I can talk to as I'm driving through."

And he says, "I'm happy to be here, happy to sit here and talk to you on the phone." So I talked with him the whole way to the house, basically. We drove, and we ultimately just ended up driving on by. I just drove slow. I didn't stop. I just kind of described what I saw. I was shocked because everything looked completely normal up until Steve and Kelly Hazen's house. Right after that, it was just black destruction, like a fireball.

Charlie: It was like Mars.

Janae: It was the weirdest thing, and I was shocked that it had gotten that far. No matter if I turned right, or if I turned left, driving west, all I saw was black. I came up on his tractor on the north side of the road where he had been trying to disk up ground and the fire caught him there. That huge tractor was just nothing left. It was almost melted down to the hubs. Then just got closer to the house, to our property, and I remember popping over the hill where we placed the cross ultimately, and seeing our cattle, and I was like, "Oh my God, we have cattle, and they are alive." I remember that was kind of a high part.

Diana: A good part.

Janae: That was an excellent, that was a great point, and Jessie was on the other end of the line saying, "That's awesome, I'm glad, that's a good thing that we've got something that survived this."

Diana: So Matt, what is your most vivid memory?

Matt: I'm not going to be as long as some of you guys have been. I'm just going off a visual. When I first saw the fire after lunch, it looked like the picture Grandma and Pop used to show me of the Dirty Thirties. I just remembered the enormity of it. I mean it just took your breath away, like how Mother Nature can just dwarf you on some things. And I just kind of had a feeling of, "Man, this is not good."

So that would be the first one. And then the second one, obviously, like Janae was talking about, was when you really got to see it with your own eyes. I mean that was... like I said, I just felt numb. I mean, sad, angry, grief, everything all in one package that ultimately I just felt paralyzed, like I couldn't move. So that's about it.

Diana: So you had to move on to take care of the cattle and community.

Matt: Yeah, you had to move to...

Janae: We immediately shifted to, "Gotta take care of the emergency" mode. Can't do anything else.

Diana: When was the first time that you were all together again?

Matt: Oh Kevin Marris allowed us to stay at his campground there, so we pulled in there and kind of regrouped.

Janae: Got the camper settled.

Chylonn: When I got back...

Diana: Did you come back Tuesday.

Chylonn: Yeah, I came back that Tuesday. I woke up; it was like 5:00 in the morning, I got up as soon as I could. I got up, I got dressed, I went upstairs, and my dad was still in bed, and I said, "Can we go now, please? I want to go back now."

He said, "Chylonn, It's 5:00 in the morning." I said, "I need to be back, Dad." He said, "How about we wait until 7:00? I know your Grandma and Grandpa have to go back, maybe you can see if you can go back with them because I..." He had work, obviously. I forgot what day it was. So I called my grandma, and I said, "Hey, my dad is bringing me into town, what are you doing?" She said, "I'm in bed, honey."

I said, "Oh, yeah, it's 5:00 in the morning, I forgot that, I'm sorry." I was like, "Do you know when Grandpa is going to leave to go back to Ashland?" She said, "No, I don't." I said, "Okay, well, when he gets up, can you call me so I can come into Dodge so we can get ready and go back." So we got there at 7:00 and I sat there, and I was just like moving, and I had to go back soon. Then she said, "What if we don't make it today?" I said, "We are going back. I will start walking if I have to. I am going back today. I have been away too long. I have to be back now." So it was like 11:00 before I left, and those were like the worst hours ever, and the drive down there seemed like ten minutes. I remember the 12-mile corner, the Englewood Junction, going over Kiger Creek.

Diana: Where was the first time you saw evidence of the fire?

Chylonn: Leaving Dodge you could see...

Diana: Well yeah, their fire, but what about our fire?

Chylonn: Well no, you could see the smoke from Dodge.

Diana: Still?

Chylynn: Still.

Matt: What about the burned part?

Chylynn: The burned part... I don't remember. You turned from Englewood, and I don't remember exactly where, I don't remember if it was before the creek or the bridge, but I just remembered seeing the smoke. It was just like you could count the hot spots. There were multiple fires going on, and I looked at my grandma, and I remember just driving, and then the very first black thing I saw...

Diana: So where did you go? Did you go out to the house?

Chylynn: No, we stopped.

Matt: I think we were at the campground.

Chylynn: I called my best friend Makenzie Cramer, and she said that she was in Buffalo. They were driving in Oklahoma on random roads. They ended up almost in Texas that night. They didn't know where to go, they just went to a road and drove. So they drove the panhandle and everywhere in Oklahoma. So she couldn't call me that night, and I didn't know where she was. I thought she was somewhere down there and I didn't know if she was back, and she wasn't.

So I just remember I said, "I'm not going to call anyone." I just wanted to find someone that knows me, because there were people from everywhere. I asked if we could stop at the fire station, in case someone might be there, and I saw Emily, and she said, "I'm glad you made it back."

I said, "I'm glad I guess." I didn't know what to say. I wasn't glad; I didn't want to be there and see everything. Then when I saw all the black, I thought, "I really should have just stayed in Dodge." I just didn't want to do that. Then I asked where my mom was and she was like, "I have no clue where your mom is." She was like, "I'm here, I don't know where anyone is, everyone is everywhere."

So I said, "Grandma, where do we go?" She said, "I don't know honey." So I said, "High school?" So we went to the high school, and nobody was there. I just said that the only person that I felt close to in Ashland, and I stayed at the firehouse for maybe an hour. Kenzie called me back, and she said, "We are at my house, all of my family is here. If you want to come over, and you don't know where your family is, just come over." So I went over.

Diana: Did your grandma just leave you at the firehouse and go back to Dodge?

Chylynn: No, she was with me the whole time.

Diana: So we know all the pastures are gone, all of the fences are gone, both houses are gone. All we have is what we have in the vehicles that we took with us. The vehicles that we left, were they ok?

Matt: Yeah.

Charlie: I remember getting back...

Matt: Burned the paint off of Chris and Jesicka's Charger, and then it had a bunch of soot.

Charlie: In all of the vehicles.

Matt: I don't remember a lot after that to be quite honest.

Janae: I know.

Matt: Because after that, it was just...

Janae: A blur.

Matt: Phone call after phone call after phone call.

Diana: So who were some of the people or agencies that were the most helpful in that first couple of days there?

Janae: Our church, the bank.

Diana: Did you have lots of people bring you hay?

Matt: Yeah.

Janae: We had a lot of people bring us hay.

Diana: Did you move the cattle pretty quickly?

Matt: Well, we moved them over to the corrals.

Janae: Yeah, we moved them to the corrals, and he had a couple people call him, offering...

Matt: Us some panels to put up over the burnt. Because even some of the corrals, some of them were destroyed. Gave us some temporary panels to block that.

Janae: Actually, you know what it was, was our hay rings that we opened up.

Matt: Yeah.

Janae: We opened up the hay rings and used them as fence.

Matt: We got the cattle taken care of pretty quickly. That was kind of our priority at that time. After that, I remember eating at the church. I remember meeting a lot of people for hay; it was just day after day.

Diana: So when did you go back to work?

Matt: Four weeks?

Diana: Just taking care of your own stuff before you actually had to go.

Matt: And I would have taken another two weeks on top of that if I could have because it was just constant phone calls. Hay, hay, hay.

Janae: Fencing supplies.

Chylynn: I think we all feel the same about that week with all the phone calls or texts. My phone did not stop ringing for about three weeks.

Celia: No one knew me.

Janae: Nobody called Celia.

Charlie: I got phone calls, Chylynn got phone calls. I got people referring numbers to me, saying, "Hey, this person needs to talk to you or your parents."

Matt: The outpouring of generosity was about as amazing as anything can be. I was blown away by it. I got emotional just because people cared that much. What we went through was tough, but seeing how much people cared blew me away. I would lose it all the time. I couldn't believe how much people really cared. I mean, you see on the news all the time about all the fighting all the time, and just for people to show that kind of love towards their fellow man was just incredible.

Charlie: We were drowning in donations within the first two days. I remember we had set up at the camper. We set up the site, and then my grandma comes down, like almost every other day she would be coming down with people who knew us from Dodge, sending donations. Within the first two days, I remember sitting outside the camper saying, "Okay, we need to sort through some of this, because we are getting all kinds of stuff, and we can't do anything with it yet." So I remember sitting out in the camper for...

Diana: So mostly clothes?

Charlie: Yeah.

Janae: Anything they could think of.

Matt: Water, tools, money.

Janae: Food, soap. Non-perishable food.

Matt: We were like, "Where do we put this? We don't even have a place for it. We have the camper, and that's the only thing we have in our name."

Charlie: All the food I remember we shoved... no, we asked the church to hold the food for us. The clothes that started getting towards us, like they started piling up because they brought boxes and totes and bags. So my grandma went, "I'm going to get you guys these totes so you can have these, and have a place to put them." So grandma came down with more donations and a bunch of totes. So I was like, "Okay, we've got clothes here, we sent the food to the church, so we are going to start sorting through this now."

Matt: (???) loaned us his enclosed trailer; then United brought an enclosed trailer with more stuff in it. So we were able to put some of that in there.

Chylynn: We still have stuff that we haven't gotten through. It's still at the church.

Janae: Some stuff. I've dwindled it down.

Matt: At least I don't think we are going to have to buy shampoo any time soon.

Chylynn: Well we might have to, but it will be awhile.

Janae: That's right, and toothpaste and toothbrushes.

Chylynn: And toothbrushes. We will never run out of toothbrushes.

Charlie: And then you would go and get personal donations. And then you decide... like because we couldn't make our own meals, you go to the school, and the school looked like a grocery store. It was a grocery store.

Chylynn: Except you didn't have to pay for anything.

Charlie: No, like the entire hallways were lined with tables that had clothes, shoes, toothpaste, deodorant, shampoos, all kinds of things. Anything you could think of lined the halls. The kitchens were running like 24-7. Every day at lunch you could come and get something to eat. There were firefighters in and out, staying there, trying to... while they were fighting fires and they were camping out in the library on cots. You would meet a new person every single time you went. It was just amazing to hear the people that decided to just drop everything to come help.

Celia: The firefighters.

Matt: All of the volunteers.

Diana: Did you go down to the camp and meet people down there?

Matt: Yes.

Diana: And have meals down there too?

Charlie: Yes.

Chyllynn: That was awesome too. And it was like home cooked meals every night, and we didn't have to do anything. Thanks to Bill and Rock.

Matt: Well because all the church camp was three or four churches. Our church was one of the main ones. So we were kind of familiar with the church camp anyway, and then when that stuff is going on, it's kind of like familiar ground. That was a staging point for all of the volunteers to help people.

Diana: Did you have a lot of volunteers from there come out and help you?

Matt: Yes.

Diana: Wilsons part two.

Diana: My cousin, Kendall Martins, came down from Inman and brought a crew.

Matt: Not a crew, an army.

Diana: So I didn't get to see it, but what all did they have?

Matt: Big, long, gooseneck flatbed, materials... I don't know; there were five or six of those rigs like that. When they first told me, I was like, "Yeah, we'll meet there at the brown house." I was running late, and I come there, and I mean, four wheelers and skid steers and all this equipment and these big flatbeds and everything, and I was just like... ..

Diana: Did they tear out all of your fence?

Matt: A lot of it, yeah. Them guys did a lot.

Diana: Yeah, they tore out...

Matt: I said, "Let's just go north and start there. Kind of went from there, and they got that done so fast; it seemed like I couldn't keep up with what they needed to do.

Chyllynn: They saw things and tore it out.

Matt: Yeah, stuff that you would work years on, took them two hours. So we sent a crew over there by Mom and Dad's house to kind of doze all of those trees into a pile, because all of it was falling down and blocking the road. So they did that and I was getting them water, a lot of water, and like aprons and just stuff they needed. Then I was directing traffic, basically a traffic cop.

Diana: And they did that all in one day?

Matt: Yeah.



Diana: They came early in the morning and then were gone?

Matt: Yeah, I mean they...

Janae: I, unfortunately, had to work that weekend and I, unfortunately, wasn't able to be a part of it.

Matt: They got all of you guyses stuff and all that stuff of mine on the north half in one day, and pushed all that timber in a pile. In one day. It was crazy.

Charlie: How many people were there?

Janae: There were like 30?

Matt: I bet you there were at least 17 people. I was like, "Wow."

Diana: Worked well, right?

Matt, Janae, Charlie: Yeah.

Diana: So, if you think back about it, you have seen grass fires before, and you have seen how they burned and everything. Do you have any comparisons of how this was like those? Anything similar?

Matt: Not really, because when I was younger I was with the volunteer fire department, and it was just mainly small, little fires. It seemed fun back then; I wasn't really scared of fire, I was kinda naive obviously. I mean, "That was kind of fun." This deal changed my mind about that completely.

Diana: So have you had more of a... we know you have had physical loss, and we know that you have had financial loss. What about an emotional loss?

Janae: We are still working through that.

Matt: Just going and doing this is kind of hard.

Janae: Even the anniversary date.

Matt: And when they had that fire the day before. I was at Chris and Jesicka's, out there to help them, and when we left, I was bawling, "This is what we gotta do, but I can't handle this, I can't handle this."

Chyllynn: It was at school this week, this week's fire, I was like, "Please God do not make this happen again, please do not make me go through this again." I was like, we obviously can get through this, we have before, but I just didn't want to deal with it. So, fireman Mr. Stebbins went, he is not the chief, but he is...

Diana: He is an assistant chief.

Chyllynn: And I knew something was bad because he only goes if they need it for like extraordinary measures. He will leave school. I remember it was the same time, and basically the same day because the fire happened on Monday, but the 6th was this Tuesday. I was in the same exact hour, and I remember looking out the windows, same door I looked out last year, and I looked, and I said, "Oh my goodness, not again." I turned around and all of my friends were just looking at me like they just had the same feeling.

I didn't talk, they were like, "Is it okay? Are you okay?" I said, "I can't talk." I went straight to class after that. I stopped and I saw Mr. Stebbins, he had his laptop, his coffee cup, his paperwork and Mr. Wetig happened to be by the door and Mr. Stebbins was like, "Can you open the door? I have to go now."

Diana: Did they keep you apprised of the fire? Did you know that the fire was out pretty early on? Did they let you know that?

Chyllynn: Yes, they told us every update.

Charlie: It was kind of weird this year because this year I was the one gone. I was at a...

Chyllynn: She was gone!

Charlie: This year I was gone on a forensics drama trip. We went up to Sterling, and so I was gone. So we didn't hear... it was in the middle of when a play was being put on, and you could tell that Ms. Lalicker, who was our proctor sponsor, she was nervous because she kept getting up. Then I remember that she had her phone, and she was like, "Hey, I don't have Deb's number, my phone is not working right now, would you text Deb." It was specifically, "Is everything okay?" It was like really short, like I'm wondering if... I was thinking that since she was the other driver that everything was okay with the busses. Something might have gone wrong.

Then you look on Snapchat, and there is another fire. I was just like, "What the heck is going on?" Then you go back through, and we go back, and I asked Ms. Lalicker if everything is okay, or she asked Deb. Deb sends back the text of, "It's all good, we are all good." So I knew from the time that I found out about that fire to the time that I found out it was okay was less than five minutes, but it was still that gut-wrenching, "It's happening again."

Chyllynn: Same time.

Charlie: The same exact time. Same day.

Diana: A little deja vu.

Janae: Yeah.

Chyllynn: I went to class and I said, "Ick, Charlie's gone." She is the one that keeps us together. She is like the mom when Mom is not there. But she is the one I go to, and then they had the scholars' bowl meet in Ingalls that same day. I never remember if Celia's on the team or not, so I ran up to Griffen, her friend, and I was like,

"Is Celia on the scholars' bowl team? Please tell me she is not, because I can not do this alone, and I do not want to do this alone, so she has to be here."

She was like, "She is not, she is right there." I was like, "Okay, thank goodness it didn't happen again." I don't know what I would have done with just Celia and me and not Charlie.

Matt: I think the biggest thing that everyone should take from this fire deal is that it affects everybody really deeply because there is nothing left. Like if you have a tornado go through, if you have a drought, if you have a wind storm, whatever happens, there is stuff left. Fire, people want to sift through the ashes, I don't want to do that. Yeah, you might find something, but it's still ruined. I think that lingers with you; I know it did me. I mean if you went through it, you're going to get over it, but you're never going to forget.

Diana: So you get a little anxious every time the fire whistle goes off?

Janae: Oh, yeah.

Diana: And when we get high wind.

Celia: It was my fourth hour, right after lunch, and we were in the middle of class, and I just started hearing the...

Jeane: Sirens and the fire trucks?

Celia: I thought it was an ambulance because I only heard one at first, and then I heard another one, and I was like, "That's not an ambulance, that is fire." I was okay with it at first, and then I heard five more, and I was like, "I swear if I hear another one, I'm going to bawl." I did not want this to happen again. I couldn't go through it again because we had a lot of homework that was due on Thursday. I had a lot of things to do.

Chyllynn: Because this was finals week!

Charlie: The end of the nine weeks.

Diana: So can you perceive of anything positive that came from the fire last year?

Matt: All of the help.

Janae: There is so much.

Celia: The donations.

Chyllynn: Half of my clothes are donations.

Matt: I'm saying the amount of appreciation for human kindness. Hearts were the biggest for me. 100% without a doubt couldn't have done it without them. I mean, the effort the firefighters and emergency people put forth is just incredible.

Chylynn: Shows God's work in that you can't go through anything like that and not feel like God is with you because He always is. He is the one that protected us through that. It shows you that He is always with you and that everything goes... in that what He wants to happen to you happens, and that it will always be for the better. Even if it may not feel like it at the time, you just have to learn from it and move on, and you always have to see the brightness in it, because if you don't see the good in anything, you will just sit there. You won't move on; you won't want to do anything. The only way that we got through this is looking on the bright side of everything. You can't just look back and say, "Oh, we used to have this. Well, this happened to us, so why should we move on, because what happens if this happens again."

Celia: I did that I don't know how many times, and Chylynn was like, "Celia you gotta stop looking back and just start moving forward."

Chylynn: She would say, "I don't like this, why did God do this to us?" It's like you can't think of it that way. You're always going to be sad. You're going to be mad.

Celia: I was mad at the world.

Chylynn: There is nothing you could have done.

Janae: It has brought us closer. That's another awesome thing.

Charlie: Well, not as close as living in the camper, because I had not ever done that.

Chylynn: Six days was long enough.

Diana: So you were able to save some stuff because you were a little bit proactive there, but is there something that you miss? Besides the house.

Matt: Innocence. It changes you inside. I wanted to just be naive and innocent and just not have to worry about that kind of stuff, but now, you just have that anxiety all the time.

Celia: I wish that I could... well, I can now, but I used to be able to walk around the house. I got up out of bed in the morning and I didn't open my eyes, I just walked to the bathroom. I didn't open my eyes, and I miss that.

Charlie: And it was pitch black in our house too, and you had to go down very steep stairs... the thing I miss is going down a flight of stairs that are steep, and now I'm like tripping over myself when I used to run down these stairs. We didn't have a railing; you would just run down the stairs.

Celia: She was an elephant when she came down.

Chylynn: They were very old and creaky. I'm pretty sure they woke up every morning with me going down the stairs or slamming on a cabinet.

Celia: Or the microwave.

Diana: So talk about the music that you found.

Charlie: Well, it was the day after and I had gone back with Chris. We all saw the house at different times, it was weird, but kind of at that point, I was with Chris. Then different people started coming. Jessica was there, somebody else, I can't remember who. I think Celia was there. Do you remember if you were there?

Celia: No, I wasn't there.

Charlie: Somebody was there, but Jessica had stopped by with somebody, I can't remember who. I was with Chris and he was like, "Can we stop? I want to look at it." So we went and we came back a separate time, and I was going to go and get my car because we needed to bring my car into town because it was still okay. I was going to drive Chris's vehicle, and he was going to check that his vehicle was okay. But we didn't know because his looked like it had gotten hit. So we were going, and I was going to go and get whichever vehicle was still there and was still able to drive.

So I went and I started to pull out, and then I opened my car door and the wind was still kind of blowing. As I stepped out, I stepped on this piece of paper. I was thinking, "What the heck is a piece of paper doing here." I had went and looked at this house already, and all of my books are completely burned. I can see the stacks of where they were and I touched them and they just crumbled. Why is there one piece of paper left? What the heck? So I go and I pick it up. We sing at our church, and we keep a hymnal at our house so if we need to, we can practice. We used to have our piano there, but we had moved it up to the other house.

So I had picked it up, and it was a piece of paper from the hymnal. It was almost perfect. All that was gone was the very edges of the paper. You could read every single word on that paper. You could even make out the page number that it was on. You just go and you look, and you think, "Everything in this house is gone." Literally, even the jewelry and the metal stuff we had is twisted and almost unrecognizable. Then you end up with one piece of paper that is perfect, except that the edges are singed. We looked and we read the words, and on one side it was, "Come ye sinners poor and needy." The other was, "Come let us reason together."

It was just a God moment right there. It was right there just like, "Come poor and needy." We just lost our house. We just lost everything that we had except for those things that we were like, "Oh, we'll just put this in the suburban and go." We lost everything except for that, and you come up with that one piece of paper that is perfect. That's just calling us to God. This other side says, "Let us reason together." It's just like calling us to be together as a family-- whether that is our small family, whether that is our church family, whether that is our community. That everyone came together; that was my God moment for ours. We go and end up with this piece of paper that was perfect.

Diana: So did you sing those songs?

Janae: We did.

Charlie: We did. The next Sunday at church that was a normal Sunday that we had everyone there, we go and we sing those two hymns. One I really liked, it was like the 1700's?

Janae: Yeah.

Charlie: It was like a 1700's hymn that you would never ever think about singing otherwise.

Chyllynn: They were like forgotten about.

Charlie: It was just, you sing it and it was uplifting, and you felt good. The "Come Let Us Reason Together," it just felt like God was there. He was with us. We had a family and people around us to take care of us. Even with the loss that we just suffered, we have everyone around us that is a family. That God is watching over us.

Diana: So where did the idea to put the cross up come from, and what to make it out of?

Matt: Well, like Charlie said, when something like that happens to you, you do some deep thinking. We were at church, and I kind of had a moment. I wasn't really listening to the sermon much. I was just...

Janae: In your own thoughts.

Matt: Melancholy. My Dad's funeral was in that church, and Janae and I got married in that church. A lot of things happening there wasn't a very good thing at this point, sitting there looking for something. Kind of like Charlie said, there was that big cross on the wall there and I looked at the light behind it. I don't know; something just kept drawing me to look at it. Actually, I felt a little bit of guilt because I just couldn't believe the outpouring of everybody, and I thought to myself, "Well if that happened to somebody else, would I have done that?"

I'm feeling guilty, like, golly, I better rethink myself and do better things. I don't know. I just felt like I had better do something to show appreciation for all the things that everybody had done. I just could see the thorns wrapped around Jesus' head and stuff like that. I had a lot of burnt T-posts. They were talking about Jesus' cross and all that burnt, and I just thought we could put something on the place somewhere. I didn't really think that it would really be quite that big at the time, but I thought we could do something. Then it kind of morphed into that.

Diana: So how long did it take you to put it together?

Matt: Well, Jessie came down and...

Janae: My brother.

Matt: And we were talking about it. I don't know how it got that big, it just did.

Janae: Well, we had told him the idea.

Chyllynn: And we had all the T-posts.

Matt: Just started rolling pieces together.

Chylynn: Matt told me first. It was right after church, and he was like, "Chylynn, I have a great idea." I was like, "What?" Then he was like, "We have T-posts, we're going to make a cross, and it is going to be humongous. We are going to weld T-posts together. We are going to get rebar or something and make a huge cross and wrap it around with..."

Matt: The burned wire.

Chylynn: With the burned barbed wire and Bam! Put it right there on the highway." I was like, "Wow, he thought that through the whole service." He was sitting there, and he would tap his foot like he is doing right now, and I was like, "What is going on in his head?" He told me, and I was like, "I knew it was something. I knew he was up to something."

Matt: I don't do stuff like that very often. I should do more stuff like that more often. Not that, but just giving back. I don't know if we give back, but maybe we give somebody a little bit of inspiration when they drive down. I don't know what that's worth, but I bet it's worth something.

Janae: Originally when we had talked about it, when he told me his idea, we had talked like we were going to try to commemorate where the brown house was and put it there.

Matt: Yeah, but that would have lost the effect.

Janae: Yeah, so we kind of sat on it for a little bit, and then Matt was like, "Hey..."

Diana: You had always been able to stop it.

Matt: I didn't even think about a grass fire to be quite honest. I mean yeah, there would be one here or there but not to that...

Chylynn: I blew out the pilot light.

Diana: A structure fire.

Matt: And we had smoke detectors in all the rooms and a couple fire extinguishers because when they were young, we had that junky furnace that heated the house. I was so scared that thing was going to light the place on fire. I wasn't worried about a grass fire; I was worried about...

Janae: No.

Charlie: I think yours was like for a passport or something?

Janae: No.

Chylynn: Did you even find it?

Charlie: I think on the being prepared, I might have something ready to go sooner, but I feel like when we were at the house, we already had a lot of that stuff in one area. Just for being prepared for tornadoes or other natural disasters. But we had most of that stuff in one place; it was kind of just misplaced because your birth certificate was needed for something else, which is why yours wasn't in the normal place.

Matt: If you're not wearing it, and it's just sitting in your closet, you should just pass it along.

Chyllynn: It does.

Matt: That stuff goes out of style.

Janae: Who cares.

Charlie: On the preparedness side, honestly the fire has made me realize how much you don't need. Like I'm so glad that we grabbed all of the pictures and the documents that we did, but like clothes wise, things like that...

Matt: Our family had pictures that we didn't even know existed, they came out of the woodwork. So in a way, it's kind of a, you've lost, but you've gained. Because they start digging through their stuff, and they are like, "Oh yeah." This and that.

Janae: I was not able to grab my baby book and Chyllynn's baby book, so those things were lost. But I was able to get Celia's and Charlie's and Matt's and different photo albums that he had from his family.

Chyllynn: We still have yet to do that.

Matt: Oh yeah, we solved the problem by putting that on the cloud. Scanning all that and putting it on the cloud.

Janae: Prepared for anything like that. I mean I know that there were some things' I grabbed photos and photo albums.

Diana: Being prepared for anything.

Janae: Yeah, but I mean just...

Matt: You would die from smoke.

Chyllynn: Not fire. Do not go in your basement during a fire.

Matt: That's more of a tornado thing.

Janae: We are putting a safe room in our new house in the basement.



Matt: Yeah, okay. We've thought about purchasing a water tank pressure unit that's ready to go.

Chyllynn: Yeah, but it was messed up because it was on a Monday.

Matt: I don't know. That would probably be something I would have to talk with your brother about. Because I mean really, we have a pretty good plan.

Janae: We are going to have rock.

Matt: Maybe have a fire break or something. We're going to have gravel.

Janae: We had talked about how we are probably not going to have grass up around the house.

Matt: Maybe some kind of barrier around the house.

Janae: Sprinkler system.

Matt: Really, we haven't focused as much as we should on that, just because we have been trying to pick up the pieces. I think once we get where we are going to live again, we will definitely have more fire extinguishers.

Diana: Anywhere, because even in town, we were asked to evacuate. Some people took their dog and their dog food. They didn't take their medicine; they didn't take their drugs. Then there were other people that took a lot of stuff.

Matt: We haven't really... we are going to have the house out there again. Are you talking about like in the rural setting, or just fire in general?

Diana: So can you do, or have you done anything to prepare for another fire or another emergency? Have you made plans as to what you would take, or where you would go? What things you would do differently?

Chyllynn: Like a T-post, or a telephone pole, I was like, "It's gotta be big so people will notice it." I mean a T-post would look like something from our fence, and I said, "It's gotta be big." And it turned out big.

Janae: At the very very first.

Matt: Well, at the very first.

Janae: Hmm.

Matt: It probably wasn't going to be the height of a door at first.

Janae: Put it up where people can see it. Put it up on the hill.

Matt: Let's put it up where people can see.

Charlie: I don't know that I would have done anything different, so much as remembered those couple things that I wanted to grab that we didn't. I think the only thing that I wish that we had ended up grabbing was Mama's wedding dress because I wanted to wear that. I remember trying it on one time. I remember trying it on right after she got her wedding dress back from Matt's marriage. She had her other one, and I wanted to wear that one. I think that is the only thing. Honestly, all of my books I can put on E-book, or all of my other stuff I can replace. But the stuff that I grabbed, I grabbed my grandma's Bible and I grabbed my Bible and I grabbed the pictures that we had. Honestly, that's the only thing I wish we would have thought of. Preparedness wise, I think that being prepared for the tornadoes made us more prepared for the fire.

Diana: So What about the community? How can they prepare, or have they prepared?

Janae: Oh wow, they already have!

Matt: I mean everyone went into beast mode on that deal.

Chyllynn: Listening to the people at my school, and what I have gone through, I try my best to tell them what they should grab, which I don't know what they would find...

Janae: Sentimental.

Chyllynn: Yeah, what they would consider. Because I know that when the Starbuck Fire happened, all the kids in my class, they said, "Well I would grab some clothes."

"I didn't grab anything. A phone charger, that's it." I said, and it kind of just makes me sick that they could have lost everything. See, we had gone through tornado drills. Matt and Mom would tell us, "You would need to get anything you would ever want." I think that...

Janae: Sentimental things.

Charlie: It's like clothes are okay, those are always the last priority.

Chyllynn: So I would say, make sure you have... I wish we still had pictures of our house because we don't. I would say take pictures of your house or take a video of your house.

Matt: Yeah, for insurance purposes.

Chyllynn: Or just to look back on.

Matt: You also need to make a list of your big possessions, because that can help a lot. There is a lot that you can do. But to be quite honest, some of that stuff we are going to do better, but...

Diana: So are you on the IRIS?

Janae: Yes, I am on IRIS and the red alert.

Diana: The weather alert and stuff like that. And you all have a plan? Because you all are in different areas of the town and the county, two counties actually. Do you have a place to meet? Do you have a phone type thing?

Matt: We have "Find Your Friends". It's an app on your phone through Apple. Some people think it's creepy because you are trying to snoop on where everybody is at, well it is actually nice because we know where everybody is at all the time.

Charlie: It is actually very helpful.

Matt: You just look on your phone and see.

Janae: But honestly, since the fire, we haven't really talked about anything.

Charlie: If we get separated.

Janae: It's like Chyllynn, we were driving back and she said something, she said, "Have you thought about colors for our new walls?" I was like, "No, not even thought about that yet."

Chyllynn: I do because I think about everything.

Janae: It's that same analogy where there are things that you should be thinking and considering, but you are so worried about trying to get all of this other stuff done.

Matt: I think that once we get moved into the new home, we will definitely re-focus on a lot of those things for sure.

Charlie: I think on like advice I would give my friends on if they would want to prepare for something like that.

Matt: Digitize, digitize, digitize.

Charlie: Is yeah, digitize your stuff, but also any of your big items that you like. I think honestly the worst part about recovering was making that insurance list. That insurance list was the worst. I hated that.

Matt: They have to do it because of the law.

Charlie: They have to do it, and I understand why, but making that list sucks. So if you can make a list as you get things, it would help so much more. Then you wouldn't have to go back through and try and think about, "Oh did we have this, or what version did we have."

Janae: Or remember it. That was depressing.

Diana: To go around and look at each room in your mind.

Chylynn: And you just knowing exactly where everything was, it's like you're walking through your house again, but you're not.

Charlie: And then you open your eyes.

Matt: And some of that stuff you don't think about until you need it.

Charlie: And then you are hit with that moment of, "Hey, where is this?"

Diana: It's right in "this" drawer.

Matt: Then you are like, "Argh, well that's not here."

Janae: Nope, not there anymore. I don't have it anymore.

Matt: Or even your friends and family are like, "Hey, can I borrow this?"

Janae: And you are like, "Oh yeah! ... Um no."

Matt: And then they are like, "What do you mean?" So you go, "Well it burnt up."

Charlie: I remember I was getting prepared for homecoming for the state basketball, and then the next homecoming the next year, for football for this year, I was like, "Oh yeah, I have this and this for these days." Then I was like, "Oh, no I don't, never mind, we will look for something else." It's kind of disappointing because you go back and you think you are okay with things and then you go back, and you are like, "Wait, no, that's not fair."

Diana: So that week of the fire was actually the state basketball tournament?

Charlie: Yes, it was the week after.

Diana: And it was the boys.

Charlie: It was sub-state.

Diana: So after the fire, how important was that game.

Celia: Very.

Diana: Was it still important to have everybody get together?

Chylynn: State basketball...

Charlie: It was sub-state.

Janae: We went to Wallace SPAA.

Diana: So you played Wallace?

Charlie: No, it was state.

Chylynn: Because we went to Rolla, we came home, and then the fire happened, and then the next weekend after the fire there was...

Diana: There was a game on Thursday night.

Chylynn: Because it was during spring break.

Diana: And it was in Wallace County.

Charlie: We played Wallace, well no, Sharon Springs.

Chylynn: Which is Wallace.

Diana: Which is Wallace county.

Chylynn: That game was difficult. I knew it was heartbreaking because I feel like the boys felt like they had to win for the town, which didn't...

Charlie: I can understand. I think it was important because we needed to think about something else for just a little bit. The entire town is so focused on recovering because it was only two or three days after.

Diana: No, there was still burning on Thursday.

Matt: Yeah, I mean, that was too soon really.

Chylynn: I wish they would have postponed it because half of our boys are farmers. And Luke Reimer, they had to stop in Minneola so he could get fluids. He had I.V. fluids like two hours before his game. And he is like one of the top players in football and almost basketball in Nebraska. He was getting I.V. fluids, and he didn't even ride the bus. His brother had to pick him up and drive him to the game, and he almost missed it. He was sick.

Charlie: I think on some levels, it was important for some people to get out of their head, especially a lot of the high school students. But on others, it was too soon for what happened. I know for a lot of the people that were directly affected, who lost houses and lost cattle. It was an either/or thing. It was either a good thing to get out of it for just a little bit and kind of get up to Dodge where there wasn't a lot of damage to the scenery, and they

were able to leave the atmosphere for just a little bit. And others it was just like, "I can't leave because I have this."

Chylynn: It made you feel like... I forgot about the fire while I was at the game. It just felt like we were at another basketball game.

Charlie: But then when we were going home, it was like, "Oh, we don't have a home to go to."

Janae: We don't have a house, we are going back to the camper.

Diana: Surreal huh.

Chylynn: At the time it was okay, I mean you just got to cheer on the boys. It hurt that they lost. But then going home, it was like...

Charlie: A sucker punch.

Chylynn: That going back, that feeling has not subsided. It is still there, it's like we should still be driving out to our house, but we're not, we are stopping in town.

Diana: So what about the smoke smell? Did it bother you for a long time?

Janae: It still does.

Chylynn: It is embedded in my nose. Still, going out to feed, you smell that ash.

Janae: There are still spots.

Matt: That are still black.

Chylynn: Under the hay bales.

Matt: There is still black in the pastures.

Janae: Driving by, I had to go to work on Wednesday morning after the fire most recently, and driving that early in the morning, you wouldn't think it would be settled down, but, that is one smell that if I never have to smell again, I will be happy.

Charlie: I just remember my nose being burned and my eyes being burned, also from crying, but also from the smoke. My whole body just felt like it was never clean unless you were immediately out of the shower. Then you walk outside and bam, you're dirty. You had ashes all over you; ashes were everywhere. It was just a nuisance, and it still is because that smell is still...

Diana: It's still there.

Charlie: And it brings back memories. The smells bring back a lot of memories for me.

Diana: So is it important for you to talk to somebody? To be able to go through your feelings and kind of, maybe not relive it, but to move on from it and to grow from it?

Janae: I honestly think that we do a really good job of having that open dialogue amongst us. I mean we will still pick up a conversation or a thought, and just start saying that though, even though we weren't talking about it earlier. Just know that we are all on the same page, that we all can be there for each other.

Celia: I just know that sometimes, I feel like you guys already know everything that happened. I think just because you talk about it so much. So like, I want a friend that won't care. I mean they care enough to listen, but I just need to get it off my chest and tell it to someone else. My whole entire story, every single detail.

Matt: I'm ready to turn the page, in my opinion.

Chyllynn: I think everybody is, but this year during this week, it was just like you re-lived it, but you didn't. I mean you didn't lose anything, there was a fire but... I mean there was a fire, and luckily they got it out soon, but it felt like I was reliving it the whole time. It was like you felt... with the fire that day, it was like you go to school, just like a normal day at school, and then there is a fire, and then it is like that same anxiousness that our town could burn down.

Matt: It will never totally leave.

Chyllynn: But we had to go through the news. This I understand. It is a good thing that we are talking about it, but the news reporter... that's sad, but I do not like talking to them. I understand that people need to learn about it and that it's good for our sake, but...

Charlie: I think that's kind of what bothered me that week of the game. Is like right after the game, Mr. Wetig, the principal, he like pulled me over and he was talking to the news reporter, and he like pulled me over and was like, "This girl lost property in the fire." Like just being put on the spot by people. I mean, I can understand getting the news out there but... That is just one big thing that I did not like. It was basically a midwestern incident. Like you would go and it wasn't on any national news channels. This is literally the largest fire they have ever had, and it didn't even make national news. I know that really annoyed me at the time, and it still does. But at the same time, when you go back and you talk about it, it's just like sometimes it is good and other times it is not. I think that honestly depends on my attitude of the day.

Matt: That bothered me a little bit at first. After seeing the outpouring of the ranchers and the farmers and the rural people, that was like...

Janae: We are our own community.

Matt: That was like the big issue. We are going to do this in spite of...

Diana: What anybody knows about us.

Matt: But at first, it was a little bit disappointing with the federal government response, or lack of. But once all the semis started pulling. Just people that said they were going to do something about it. I can't speak for everyone, but I forgot about the federal government. I was just like, "This is awesome, I mean this is just amazing."

Janae: You did, yeah.

Matt: So in the end, I think it was better that way than if FEMA had come in and taken over. It made it seem more intimate with the people who do the same thing that you do.

Janae: Brothers helping brothers.

Matt: Somebody who has an idea what your needs are.

Diana: What farming is all about.

Janae: What ranching is all about.

Diana: Ok, so we could go on all night, but do you have any other thoughts about this experience? Some last things that you would like to share?

Matt: I would just say, like you said, once everybody finally gets up off the matt and gets moving, let's have a more efficient game plan, and I know that the firefighters have already, and we've seen it with this latest test. But as far as individuals, just be more vigilant, more aware of your surroundings when that time of the year comes around. Just like driving through grass or being careless. When you know it is windy and dry out, don't do some of the things that you normally do. Just don't do them. Like grinding or welding or whatever. If everybody could kind of think that way. There is still going to be stuff but...

Chyllynn: Hopefully never that bad.

Celia: I was talking to my P.E. teacher and my science teacher, which is Mr. Stebbins. We were talking about it on the day after the 6th this year; we were talking about it, and he said, "How are you holding up?" I said, "It takes time. All of the grief and all of the everything, it just takes time to go away, but it will never officially go away. It just takes time to get it in the back of your mind."

Janae: To work through it.

Matt: Build a callus over it.

Janae: Build a callus over it is right. It never goes away.

Chyllynn: It doesn't go away. Talking about it now, it feels like you are reliving it because those emotions are so strong.



Janae: I find that I only want to talk about it with certain people, or amongst certain people. I don't want to talk about it just to anybody.

Chylynn: Those are such raw emotions that you don't want to tell people.

Matt: I didn't really think it would help me if I talked about it all, but I feel like if I don't talk about it, some people might not benefit from that information. I don't like talking about it at all to be quite honest.

Diana: Well, we want to thank you all for sharing your experience with us. So thank you very much.

Matt, Janae, Charlie, Chylynn, Celia: Thank you.