

March 6, 2017, STARBUCK FIRE

NEED NAMES: Jim, Connie, Red, Scott, John and others

This day started out like any other day of that month. Worry, with no moisture and high winds. The thought of fire was in everyone's mind. I worked the night shift and remember listening to the weather and hearing that Clark County would be put in a fire advisory for the day. I went home at 7:30 a.m. that morning and went to bed with no worries, as I knew we would be fine. What I didn't expect was what I woke up to. I walked out of the bedroom at 1:00 pm and saw Rod sitting on the couch. I asked, "Are you taking a late lunch?"

Rod looked at me with dread on his face and said, "No, the wind is so bad you can't even work out there." As I walked into the living room, I could see out the window at what looked to me like smoke. At 1:15 pm, I went outside to see what was going on. The wind was so strong, it almost tore the door right out of my hand. Sand and dirt filled the air, but I instantly smelt smoke and as I looked up the sun was covered by a red cloud. I went back in and asked Rod if he was sure there wasn't a fire?

About that time his brother, who was on the volunteer fire department, said there was a big fire south of Englewood and that they needed help. So we went into action; we loaded up in the pickup and hooked onto the water trailer. We ran into town and filled it at 1:36 pm. Rod called a friend of his, that has a house and some land with cattle, to see if he needed help. We ran to Spott's Lumber to get supplies and were ready to head to Kyle's when Rod received another call from his brother. Another fire had been spotted 10 miles directly west from the ranch, and we needed to head that way with the water trailer.

At that time, the wind was blowing from the south and the fire was headed straight for the Clark State Lake. As we came up the hill, my mind was reeling with what I thought at the time was the worst fear in my life. To the north and west, all you could see were flames and some major amounts of black smoke. Looking to the south, all you could see was smoke for miles and miles. Because the fires south and west were so big, only one fire truck was sent up north. I kept telling Rod there was no way we could get close enough to the fire to do any good. It was moving so fast that if you tried to fight it there would have been people hurt. We stayed up there watching the fire blaze on the northeast and hoping it didn't reach the north end of the ranch. About 3:00pm, I received a call from Erin at the hospital asking what they should do with the patients. I stood there looking south and seeing there was no way of gaining control anytime soon.

I told her I was putting in the evacuation orders and to start the process of moving them out of town. As soon as I hung up, the guilt of not being there to help was ripping through the core of my heart. I told Rod I needed to get to town. Dave Bouziden had shown up to assess things and he said he would take me to town. On our way down the hill, I looked at the Weather Channel, and my heart dropped. Dave asked me what was wrong and all I could say was, "We are in a lot more trouble than we thought." I told him the wind was fixing to shift from a south wind to a north wind, which meant the fire north of Ashland was about to turn south within the hour. Panic hit us both.

He told me he was going to drop me off at their house and have Carol take me to town so he could get on the tractor to start plowing ground around their house and shops. We greeted Carol at the garage, she could see the fear in our faces. With no shoes on, she loaded us both in the vehicle and we took off for town. I looked back to wave at Dave. It didn't occur to me at the time that it would be the last time I would see their house, which was sad for me, as we spent a lot of time there when Rod worked for Dave in the past.

Heading to town, I guess the look of dread never left my face because Carol asked if something else was wrong. With a tear in my eye, all I could say was within the next hour life as we knew it was fixing to change. She dropped me off at the hospital, and I remember looking back to the north, looking at a very black sky, feeling the very warm wind on my face, and praying to God to keep us all safe.

I walked into the hospital and began helping with the evacuation process. As we finished getting everyone out and locking the doors to the building, the EMS pager went off to activate EMS to the scene of an accident at the Sitka Junction. At that time, I radioed in to dispatch that the hospital had been evacuated and they would have to take the patients to another facility. That's when it hit me. Kayla, my daughter, was on that ambulance and an entirely new fear hit. Our daughter was driving into a fire of hell to save others.

As I locked the last door of the hospital, I was hit in the face with a cold, brisk wind and I knew we were heading into a hellish fire. As I walked out and looked around, there was smoke to the north so black and thick you couldn't even see the sky. Looking to the west, all you could see were flames. I hurried and called Rod to come pick me up. He was leaving Dave's to come to town for more water and to head back to the ranch. I ran to the firehouse but was stopped by Tami Podzemny who gave me a ride. You could tell she was scared too.

I told her the town was being evacuated and that she needed to get out of town. I patted her on the shoulder and got out of the car. I remember seeing Jamie Waggoner and we just fell into each other's arms and cried. We exchanged conversations and soon parted ways giving each other one last hug. As I was getting into the pickup, we saw Brenda Mead, who was also in tears, saying Jerry had just lost his house. He lived 20 miles north of us, and we knew we had to get moving. One fear was relieved; as we were going through town, we saw the ambulance with our daughter on it going to Minneola.

I was so happy to see her alive and well, but as we turned north our hearts filled with tension again. We were trying to make a game plan of how we were going to get the horses in the pens, get the cattle onto wheat pasture, and then load the cat, dogs, and horses and head out. I looked at the clock, and it was 4:41 p.m. Headed up the hill, I couldn't believe how much had happened in such a short amount of time. The winds had shifted, and temps had dropped from 75 down to 50 within an hour.

Rod had called C..J, up at the Giles Ranch, who said it had not hit them yet, but they could see it. With 15 miles distance between us, we knew it was time to kick it into overdrive. We got to the house and Rod went to catch the horses. I ran into the house to get a few personal items: clothes, my cat, and meds. As I walked through the house, I headed straight to the refrigerator to get Rod's insulin. I went over to the couch and looked out the big bay window; I could see him running from the corrals to the west. My heart dropped just seeing the look on his face. I knew we were in trouble and at that time I felt all the air sucked out of my house. I could hardly breathe. The cat was lying on the couch, I ran by and petted her and told her it would all be okay, God would take care of us.

I ran out of the house, got into the truck and pulled over to the containers to hook on to the horse trailer. Rod was pulling up in his truck at the same time, but as I got out instead of the cold wind hitting me like before, I felt nothing but heat. As I looked up, I saw fire along the entire ridge of the hill. My legs went to Jello, my heart went to my throat, and complete panic came over me. I started screaming at Rod and pushing him back in the truck telling him to get back in the truck, to get out of there, and don't look back.

I got in my pickup and headed to Mount Jesus Road. When I got a half mile from the house, I didn't see Rod behind me, so I pulled off the road to stop and look for him. As I got out, he went beside me and what I thought was dust behind me was smoke. He was right behind me, but I couldn't see him. I looked back knowing at that very second we were minutes away from losing everything we had worked so hard for. From the time we arrived at the house, to the time we left, was 18 minutes. That is how fast that fire moved.

I jumped back in the pick-up, smoke filled my nose, and my vision. I called Rod as we were pulling out of the ranch on to the Mount Jesus road, and told him, "No matter what, you don't let up, you don't hit your brakes. Just drive as fast as you can." As we turned south, there were flames on both sides of the road I couldn't see anything except the brake lights on Rod's water trailer. That's when I knew we had a corner to turn or I would have probably driven into the ditch.

Rod has driven that road so many times that I think he knows it by heart. My legs were shaking so bad I had a hard time keeping my foot on the gas pedal, but I knew at that moment it was life or death. I couldn't believe we were running 70 mph and the fire stayed right with us as we reached the highway, I noticed it was veering off to the southeast and I actually took a breath, which I am pretty sure I had not done the past 20 minutes. When we turned west to head into Ashland, I couldn't believe how many cars were parked on the side of the road. I wasn't sure if they were just watching or if they weren't sure where to go. Heck at that time I didn't know what to do.

We pulled in to the parking lot by Nina's Ranch House restaurant so I could leave my truck there and get in with Rod. As I sat in the passenger seat, I saw the game warden stop in the middle of the road and help someone out of his pickup. I couldn't believe my eyes, it was my friend and coworker with her son. I ran over to see if they were okay. She nodded yes, but her son had a laceration on his head. When I asked what happened, she said she was in the MVA that was out at Sitka. The very one my daughter had gone to.

I gave her a hug, told her I was so sorry and suggested she take him to Minneola as we had already shut the hospital down and had no providers. With that, we parted ways. I remember running into the EMS building to see if Kayla was there, but she was still in Minneola. I looked up at the board and saw a couple names, I asked Millie and John what those names were, they said they were people in Englewood who had lost their homes.

I told John to add ours to that list; he looked at me like he was confused. He said, "Now hold on, the fire isn't even to your place." I looked at him and for the first time and started crying. I said, "John, do you have any idea what is even going on out there and how fast everything is moving? What you think is still south of the Clark State Lake? It has already moved south through Giles, Millers, and Howells." About that time, I received a call from Matt Wilson, who was watching his house burn to the ground. I said, "Well John, there is another you can add to your list."

I grabbed a few waters, food, and snacks, dried my eyes and went back out to the pickup. I got in and told Rod, "We might have lost our house, but I will be damned if we lose another," and we started hauling water to fire trucks. By that time, it was 6:30pm, and everywhere you looked the sky was full of smoke and the land was in flames. Mike Harden was plowing the land around the west side of town and the new hospital to try and salvage the town and that hospital that wasn't even occupied yet.

While our minds were in overdrive, we sat there silent, and although it was only minutes, it felt like a lifetime. That's about the time our phones started blowing up. Justin called to tell us he was on his way, Nick called to tell us he had just loaded Kendra and Larken and they were leaving for Colorado. Kayla called to tell us they were on their way back with the ambulance, but got stopped at the Englewood Junction and that all the roads going in and out of Ashland had been closed. Corbin was safe with Montana Dawn in Buffalo. Kyle Kaltenbach was on the phone with Rod asking for help ASAP. His parents, Mark and Mary, were fixing to lose their house; the barns were engulfed in flames. We headed that way, and we could see from two miles away that everything was on fire. At that point, we assumed everything was gone, but to our surprise the house was unscathed. We parked on the north side of their home and started pouring water on the house and surrounding trees; we were successful at keeping the house from burning to the ground. When we knew it was no longer a threat, Rod told Kyle we were going to head to the ranch and assess the damage. There was no way Kyle was having that; he told Rod to go back to town and fill up the water tank while he ran to the house.

As we pulled into the fire station lot, we received that call nobody should ever receive. Kyle proceeded to tell Rod not to go out there, it looked like a war zone. Dead cattle were lying everywhere, living cattle that were standing on the road with no hair and smoldering skin. Our house was in the basement, and he needed to put our horse down, as his face had been burned off and he had no eyes left to even see where he was going. The only things left standing were the shop and the calving barn.

Even though I knew the minute we left the ranch earlier that the house would be gone, hearing it made it real. The guilt over leaving our pets behind was overwhelming. Even though in the back of my mind I knew if we had stayed to get them, we all would have lost our lives, it was still a sickening feeling. At that moment I felt as though life, as we knew it, was over and I was wishing I was 6 foot underground; I felt completely dead inside.

Justin arrived from Wichita at 9 p.m., saying he had found one road that was open at Kingsdown and was able to come down the lake road. He went to the house and, amazingly enough, his dog was still alive and unharmed. Apparently, he laid down in his water trough to stay out of the fire. The mare was also still alive. My heart eased a little, my horse was still alive, but then the guilt hit again that Rod's horse Willis was not as lucky.

Justin met us in town around 9:15 p.m. and we sat in town, which now felt isolated since everyone had been evacuated. Only the firetrucks, cops, and a handful of ranchers were left. At that point, there was nothing we could do about the ranch, so we hauled water to any firetruck that needed it. We did that until 4 a.m. when we quit out of pure exhaustion and went to Francis's shop to sleep, but sleep never came.

March 7th, 6:30 a.m.

Mad Max- it was the only words that came to my mind as we headed north to the ranch. It looked like a desert. No grass for as far as your eyes could see; blackened dirt and sand was all that was left. Mile after mile of fence lay on the ground with no wood or corners left standing. What trees were left stood smoldering with no life left in them. As we reached the top of the hill to go to the ranch, we stopped the pickup and got out to assess the damage, but all I could do is stare in disbelief. From the top of the hill looking down to Ashland felt like a double-edged sword. Relief that our community didn't burn to the ground and grief that all around it was black ash. In the distance, looking south, there was still a large amount of smoke, which only meant one thing: our poor firefighters were still fighting fires. I was surprised, since they had clocked the fire moving anywhere from 45-70 miles an hour, I figured it would be long gone, but I was wrong.

My heart was on overload, 360 degrees of nothing but sand and black ash. The sun was up and shining and there was no wind. That day should have been one of beauty. Not one of dread. We loaded back up to head to the house. My phone began ringing, and I didn't recognize the number but answered it anyway. A very nice man was on the other end and you could hear the concern in his voice. He asked if we were okay and then proceeded to ask how he could help. He said that he had two semi-loads of hay headed our way. I was in shock at how fast surrounding communities were to jump in and offer to help.

As I hung up the phone, reality hit. Coming around the curve into the ranch, what I had seen every day was no longer there. Our house was gone. We knew the night before it was going to be gone, but it's never real until you actually see it with your own eyes. Now only the tin from the roof lay in the basement. Dead cattle lay in every direction you turned. There were some cows still alive, standing there and unable to move. With no hair left on their bodies, stiff from the burnt skin, all they could do was just stand there. There looked to be

maybe 25-30 head of cows and calves that were unharmed, which meant they were in the pens when the fire went through. I was thankful to see the shop and the calving barn were still standing.

As I drove down to the shop, once again my heart broke. There stood a cow on one side of the fence and her calf on the other side, both so burnt and they couldn't get to each other. It was so sad. Then I turned left to pull into the shop and I thought I was going to puke, there in the middle of the driveway was Willis, our horse, with a bullet hole in his skull. Every time I saw something new, I thought it was the worst thing anyone could ever see, but then I would turn around and it just kept getting worse.

The only thing that kept us moving forward was the family support. Both Nick and Justin were there, and Rod's family came out to help in any way they could. I believe it's a day they will never forget. So many emotions were flooding over us, it was unreal. Guilt was the number one thing on my list. Our intention the day before was to keep the fire from hitting the ranch. When we knew it couldn't be prevented, it was then to save our pets and horses and then turn the cattle out to wheat, but we didn't have time to do any of that. Now all those things were gone.

About that time, I thought I heard a cat. To my disbelief, here came Bill and Boo-Boo, our outdoor cats. They had severely burnt paws and ears, but they were still alive. Sandra, Rod's sister was nice enough to take them to the vet so we could continue assessing. I was thankful that my mare was still alive and well, our only guess as to how Willis died was she must have pinned him in the corner out of fear, and he received burns that she didn't. It's the only thing we could figure that happened.

We were headed up to the spot where our house once sat; I was in for a surprise I wasn't expecting. The fire was so hot nothing was left but the frames of the freezers, one fridge, and one bed-frame. Everything else was gone; nothing but ash lay in the basement. The one thing we couldn't figure out was the fact Rod's pickup was in the driveway, everything around it was gone. Trees were burnt to a crisp, the barbeque melted, the well-house was gone, but there sat his pickup unharmed other than melted headlights and a few places scorched by the flames. It was a mystery.

About that time, the ranch started filling with help. It was also at that time that Rod received a call from the neighbor to the north, Brandon Grigsby, that they were able to save all of our cows and calves that were at the Baker. It was a miracle anything survived that fire. We will forever be grateful. The tears in Jim's eyes at the news were of pure gratitude that the breed of cattle he started so many years ago could continue. But even with the good news, you could see the hurt in his face. I felt so bad for him.

For the rest of the day, I, along with Sandra, Becky, Karla, and Stacy, hauled the cattle Brandon had back to the ranch and put them in the pens. Rod and all the rest went out to start putting down cattle that were still alive but burnt so badly that they couldn't even move. The next five days were spent doing the same thing. Putting down cattle, dragging cattle into piles and taking pictures, it's a scene that will never escape your memory.

Surprisingly enough, as we went to each pasture, we found some still alive with only minor burns. With no fences to keep anything in, the guys on horses spent their time driving them to the nearest corrals, where I would pick them up and take back to the house pens. There were a lot more calves than there were cows; fortunately, our friend Erin Boggs and the Meade 4-H group started taking calves to bottle feed and tend to burns. They also brought clothes, since we had none. This is a God-sent group for sure. In the days that followed, we were blessed by receiving hay, feed tubs, some fencing materials, horse feed, clothes, food and personal items by way of donations. We also received two horses to replace Willis and most of all new friendships that will last a lifetime.

Our friend Arty came down for a week to help out and bring us his camper to live in. By the end of the week, 93 cattle had to be put down for a total of 553 head of cattle that died. The next step was digging holes

big enough to fit 100 head in. It was a horrible sight. It was so hot that week they were busting open from bloating. I remember two different cows that their bellies burst open and they had calves still alive; the calves only lived seconds. The whole week was just heart-wrenching. The smell was overwhelming to say the least, once all the cattle were gathered into five different locations and holes were dug we were able to bury them. We thank God every day for the volunteers that came in and pushed them in and covered them with dirt using bulldozers. It took two days to get them all buried.

While this was going on, we were able to get enough fence put up on two wheat pastures for the cattle that were left. With no wheat left from having cattle on it over the winter, we were very grateful to those who donated hay. We began picking calves off that were unable to get milk due to the udder of the cows being so burnt they were unable to nurse. I was thankful that I was allowed to take off time from work at the hospital so I could help Rod at the ranch.

As the week came to an end, so did all the help. Everyone had their own jobs they needed to get back to, so after that, it was just Rod and me. We remained as strong as we could. Leaning on each other for support, but it was very hard not to leave and move on, but it was just not something we could do. Jim Miller might own the ranch, but in our own hearts those cattle and the ranch felt like home and leaving just didn't seem like an option. So we carried on making the best of a bad situation. Our new worry was if we were going to get rain anytime soon. Day after day went by without even a chance of it. The wind blew and that seemed to be all we were going to get, but after a month the rain finally came, and it came in abundance, with most places seeing over 5 inches. Creeks were running full of water, even in places I had never seen it run. Although our prayers were answered and we received the rain we desperately needed, it came with new problems like washing roads away and washing the topsoil off the ground and any seed that might have been left to seed grass. But we weren't going to complain we got the moisture we needed. As weeks went by, we had volunteers here taking old fence out and continued to receive donated hay. We were able to get electricity and water so we could move back out to the ranch. We had two crews building fence. I went back to work and Rod stayed busy trying to get things back in order.

March 6th, 2018

What a year. As I sit in my new house reflecting on the year past, my heart remains in my throat as the weather is identical to what it was at this same time last year. No rain since September 24th, the wind blowing 50-60 miles per hour, and humidity below 8%. Yesterday we had a very big scare as a fire started five miles west of Ashland, burning nearly 2,000 acres of pasture. Thank goodness nobody was hurt and no structures burned, but the fear remained. Most people were on edge, not knowing if this was going to be a repeat of last year. Thankfully, the firefighters were able to gain control quickly. As time has gone by, the emotions have gotten better, but I do believe a piece of all of us affected by that fire had a little something die inside. The images will never go away, but I also believe with time we have all healed and will continue to heal.