

Diana: What is your name?

Haley: Haley Walker.

Diana: Where do you live?

Haley: We live four miles west and a mile north of Ashland.

Diana: How old are you?

Haley: I am 32.

Diana: When did you first become aware that there was a fire known as the Starbuck Fire (hereafter called, “the fire.”)?

Haley: It was approximately 1:00 or 1:30 in the afternoon on March 6, 2017. I had just dropped my daughter off at school and saw my parents go through town with their Polaris Ranger on the trailer. It was really odd for them to be in town with the Ranger at that time of day, so I followed them to the Co-op gas pumps and asked them what they were doing. They said they were headed over to help my aunt and uncle and my cousins Mark and Mary Kaltenbach and Kyle Kaltenbach move cows, because at that time they were maybe in danger of the fire.

Diana: So when did your daughter get released from school?

Haley: I think they were released approximately at 3:30 maybe? I really don't know. As soon as I saw my parents, I called my husband to see where his location was. He too was going to get his Ranger and go help move cows over near the Englewood area at Mark and Mary and Kyle Kaltenbach's. He said to just kind of be on standby; he takes care of cattle southeast of Ashland for Barrett Broadie. We had a few head of yearlings, but all of them were on wheat pasture, so we knew they should hopefully be safe. He said to be on standby in case we needed to go start moving Barrett's cows off of Barrett's grass. At that point, I just kind of started taking mental notes of where all our belongings were and since we live four miles west of town, and at that time the fire was southwest of Englewood, so depending on which way the wind shifted, I knew I either needed to be at our house or at Barrett's cows to start moving them off of grass.

Diana: So when did you hear about the fire in the north?

Haley: Gosh, I left town approximately 2:30 or 3:00. I went to my grandmother's house first, which is southeast of town a few miles. She was in Arizona, so I started her yard sprinkler, again, just in case. We had no idea what was about to happen. Then I went and got in some team roping steers that we had on her grass and put them in her corral. Then I went to Barrett's and started moving cows off of grass and putting them on wheat. When we got done with that, that was kind of a large ordeal. There were several bunches of cows to move, and it was just kind of funny (odd), but as I was moving cows to wheat, the smoke in the west just kept getting darker and darker and obviously closer and closer to me. Not having any idea where the fire was, I kept moving cows. Eventually my husband got there, Dustin and my brother Jule helped as well. We got all of Barrett's cows on wheat. The final bunch that we moved, by the time we got them on wheat, I'd say our visibility was maybe a quarter mile. The smoke was so thick. When I started that task, the fire was miles and miles away and I could barely see the smoke. So just in a matter of time, our visibility went from clear as day to maybe a quarter mile.

Diana: So were you moving cattle with horses or with the four-wheeler?

Haley: I was in a pickup at that point, and then...

Diana: Did you use horses at all?

Haley: We never used horses. Instead of going home from town, I went south of town. I had a car and I got my grandmother's pickup and moved the roping steers and then I started moving Barrett's cows with my grandmother's pickup. It isn't a cake wagon, it's just a regular bed pickup, so I had a hard time moving cows with that. But when my brother got there (he was there before my husband), he had a cake pickup and they would follow the caker more easily than they were going with the other pickup.

Then when Dustin got there with his pickup as well, we just moved as fast as we could. It was a little chaotic, but we got it done.

Diana: Did you ever go home?

Haley: After we got that task completed, by the Grace of God, I got a call from the command center. Becky Mishler asked me where my grandmother was.

She said, "Is your grandmother home?"

I said, "No, she's in Arizona. Is the fire getting close to there?"

And she said, "No, we're just trying to locate and make sure we have a head count on everybody and know where all the people are."

I asked if they could tell me where the fire was, and they weren't 100% sure but thought it was near Kiger Creek at that point. I'm roughly four or five miles from Kiger Creek and the wind's blowing around 50 miles an hour. So I was south of town still at that point, not far from Barrett's place. I basically just started rounding up my army. By the Grace of God, my cousin Bryce was at the vet clinic getting a horse; so he had his trailer and went to our house and caught our horses for us. I called my in-laws and Bill and Darletta McLaughlin. They came to our house and we just started loading up whatever we thought was valuable from the house. We loaded my grandmother's pickup, Darletta's car, a horse trailer, and my cousin's pickup, with everything, saddles... whatever we could find that was valuable.

At that point, it was when I knew that the fire from the north was coming. I could see the smoke at that point.

Diana: Do you know what time that was?

Haley: I'm going to guess it was around 6:00 or 7:00, maybe. I don't really know for sure. When we got all of our stuff loaded... thankfully, to back that up, the fire was not at Kiger Creek, or we would have really been unfortunate. It was coming from the north at that point and I could definitely see the smoke. We kind of loaded all our stuff up and we just stood looking at each other wondering what to do next.

At that point, the fire was coming pretty hard from the north and we thought that Jeff and Katrina Krier and Garth and Amanda Gardiner would be the next most-at-risk houses. So my husband, Dustin, Bryce and Bill all took their vehicles and ended up at Jeff and Katrina's and got a horse out of there and all their tack. Then my mother-in-law and I just sat in our yard at our house and watched it. Eventually, we could see that not just the smoke but the flames. It was probably a quarter or a half-mile away from our house. So we thought if the wind changed directions we would be in trouble. We decided to go ahead and leave our house. We went over to the Englewood Junction and just decided to wait it out.

Diana: So how did you feel, thinking that your house might not be there when you came back?

Haley: When I left the driveway, or whenever I left town and started gathering cows, I started videoing. I didn't know what was going to happen the rest of the day, but I wanted documentation of the chaos and what the fear felt like. So I started filming just little snippets of stuff while I was moving cattle. Whenever I left my driveway.... (has to pause).

Diana: It is emotional.

Haley: When I left the driveway, I took a video of... I could see the flames on top of the hill.

Diana: Were they close?

Haley: Well, they weren't close to us. (Has to pause). I think what is so hard, is that there is a little bit of shame that when I was videoing I was praying that the wind wouldn't change directions. Because I knew we would be safe if it didn't. But as soon as that come out of my mouth, I mean in that same breath, I realized that I was praying that my neighbor's house would be gone. (Has to pause.)

Diana: Yes. That's hard. So you basically evacuated from your house and you were safe at the Englewood Junction? There was no fire coming up that way any more? It had all gone east?

Haley: Yes. Then back when I got to the Englewood Junction, Katrina and Gus were sitting in their car. She got out and came over to talk to me. She said, "Haley, I didn't grab anything out of the house."

I said, "You need to go back to your house right now."

She said, "I can't, they've got the highway shut down."

I said, "I don't care, Katrina. If you see fire, you turn around and come back. But if your house is still there and you can get into it, you go right now. But you need to be prepared for what you're about to see." Because while I was telling her to go, at the same time, I didn't know if her house was going to be there."

Diana: Yes, because it was moving pretty fast, wasn't it?

Haley: It was crazy.

Diana: Did you see the big dark cloud of smoke that came across? That that what you were seeing when you were still at your grandmother's?

Haley: Yes. When I came to town to go my house, it was like the Dust Bowl. You couldn't hardly even see, the smoke was so thick everywhere. When we were sitting at the Englewood Junction, my husband still hadn't come. Bryce eventually came and Bill came.

Diana: So how were you keeping in contact with all these people?

Haley: Our cell phones were still working and charged at that point. I really think about 10:00 or maybe even later, 11:00 or midnight, I don't know, we all looked at each other. It was like, "I guess we'd better find some place to go for the night. This isn't going to end."

I assumed we'd just go back to my house, that when the fire came through, I'd go back and we'd unload. But it didn't take us very long to realize that that wasn't going to be the case. This was going to be a long night.

Diana: There was still fire all around your house? Where did you end up going?

Haley: We decided to go to Coldwater via Minneola, because that was where my kids were with my mom and my sister-in-law, Heidi, and Kelly Hazen. We headed north and my mom called and said to turn around and go to Kyle's. They were going to come down there. So we turned around, Bryce and I; I was with Bryce at that point with my horses. Bryce and I went to Kyle's, and whenever I got out of the pickup to unload my horses, somebody told me, "Sorry to hear that your house is gone."

I said, "Oh, is that the word on the street? That my house is officially gone?"

He said, "That's what I heard."

I said, "Okay." So I took my horses and... (has to pause).

Diana: Went to Kyles? Did you stay there all night, or did you go out during the night? Or did you just go to bed?

Haley: Bryce went ahead and dropped me and the horses off, and he went on to Coldwater. That's where his kids and his wife was. I stayed at Kyle's for quite a while until Dustin eventually was able to get back to our house. He said it was indeed still standing.

So I said, "Come and get me, right now! I want to see it."

Diana: So where had he been all this time?

Haley: I'm really not sure! He went to Jeff's and helped Jeff for a while. I don't know where he went after that until he came to me. I think he went back to Barrett's and to my grandmother's to make sure that her house was still there or if there was anything he could do. Eventually, he came and got me and we went to our house first. It was still there, but the fire was still all around. We went on to Barrett's to make sure the cows were all still okay.

Diana: So when you say, "The fire was all around." Are you seeing big flames jumping, or are you just seeing little flames? Or are you seeing smoke?

Haley: At that point, it was mostly just the back-burn, like the head of the main fire had already gone through. But the back-burn was in some CRP grass, so it looked big.

Diana: Was the wind still blowing?

Haley: Yes. I can't recall exactly what time this was. We had been there several times through the night. We went from our house to my grandmother's house to Barrett's to my brother Jule's, just to make sure there was nothing else we could do to help fight it.

We didn't have a water trailer, we just....

Diana: Were you at Sitka when the big flames were jumping on the elevator?

Haley: No, we got there... we went down the Sitka dirt road and the fire was already to the railroad ties, so it kind of went through the Sitka area and it was burning the huge pile of railroad ties which were on the south side of the old restaurant. It was basically west of my brother's driveway. So, needless to say, he was not out of danger. He was still at risk. At one point earlier that night, the fire had jumped the highway, but he was right there waiting on it and had a water trailer and put it out. Now the huge railroad tie pile was burning. The flames were, in my opinion, huge! So it wouldn't have taken nothing for an ember to fly across the highway and his house would have been up in no time. So he was standing guard, and we went and checked on him.

At one point, we went back to our house. You asked, "How big were the flames?" The flames to me were big. They weren't huge, but they were big.

I told Dustin, "We've got to call for a truck! Or we are not making it out of this."

Diana: So when you say, is it like jumping as high as the ceiling over here? (Nine feet). Were they that tall, or were they taller?

Haley: I'd say 20 or 30 feet, because the CRP grass was old, dead grass. So it was big. We didn't call for a truck, because we knew we couldn't.

Diana: Well, you could, but nothing was coming.

Haley: They were everywhere. It kind of felt selfish, I don't know, to call for one. I knew they were doing everything they could do. We left again and went back to my grandmother's. She is surrounded by grass. Of course, our house is too, but hers is a lot of CRP. Again, the head of the fire had gone on through, and a lot of people had helped save her place. When we got there, the CRP was kind of back burning and it was again, big flames, 20 to 30 feet high.

Eventually, we went back to our house again, and when we topped the hill of our driveway, I thought the fire was climbing up our garage. I was telling Dustin he was not driving fast enough! We got there and it wasn't on our garage, it was just in our yard. We didn't have electricity. So he grabbed a bucket and ran to the windmill, which is 50 yards away from our house. Then I grabbed an old heavy winter coat and just started beating the flames. With his bucket, we got it put out in our yard.

Diana: Did they come foam your house? Do you know if the fire trucks were ever there?

Haley: We certainly don't think they were ever there, but not the night of March 6 or the early morning of March 7th. We got there about 5:00 or 5:30, when the fire was in our yard. It certainly did not feel or smell like it had been foamed.

Diana: So you didn't really sleep all night?

Haley: We did not. We also got little yard sprayers and put out hotspots in our pasture not too far from the house. Then, we kind of laughed. Not laughed, but when we were doing it, we were taking turns because we were both cold. But with the adrenaline, we just kept going. He would sit in the pickup for a little bit and I would spray and put out hotspots, then I would sit in the pickup and he would do it. We just did it and didn't think anything of it. We got all of ours put out and got in the pickup to go to my grandmother's, thinking we would potentially find her house in flames. We didn't know what we were going to find, but we were going to take what water we had and do what we could.

When we got in the pickup to leave, Dustin said, "Look and see how cold it is." I got on my phone and looked, and it was 28 degrees. That was about 5:30 on the morning of March 7.

Diana: No coats?

Haley: No coats. I think we even had short sleeves on, I don't know.

Diana: So did you ever go to bed?

Haley: No. We took about a 30 minute nap, I think, about 8:30 the next morning.

Diana: At your house, or your grandmother's?

Haley: We actually ended up staying at my mother-in-law's, Darletta and Bill McLaughlin's. At that point, my kids were in Dodge with my Mom. They went from Coldwater to Dodge to put my brother's horses away there. They just got a motel room there and stayed the night. So we slept for about 30 minutes the next morning and then went and gathered up all of our stuff at the Englewood Junction and got my kids back.

Diana: Did you end up helping Kaltenbach's up north of town?

Haley: We were not able to get that far. The next day, I just kind of stood guard at our house. My husband got his Ranger and just checked Barrett's stuff and then wherever he could help. I think he helped Bill Seacat move some cows, and then he ended up at Protection and he was headed to his Grandma Gracie McLaughlin's area. He saw smoke by John Herd's and called John to see if he needed help. Sure enough, he was trying to move cows. This John Herd lives three miles northwest of Protection. Dustin went and helped, and they got cows moved just in the nick of time before the fire went through there.

Diana: So Tuesday, you're just at home by yourself?

Haley: I was at home by myself. Thankfully, Dar took the girls and Bill brought me a four-wheeler. Somehow, I still don't really understand why or how, I still had fire in my area. I had thought the fire

had gone through there, but I had Colorado Forestry trucks in and out of my driveway all day, basically, on Tuesday.

We have evergreen trees west of our house, and I had tons of hot spots in there. I don't think it would have gone anywhere, but I wasn't leaving it to come back and find if it had. I just kind of watched all that and made sure we were going to be okay.

Diana: So you had the horses home by then?

Haley: They were still at Kyles. All of our trailers were tied up with bucket calves and tack and all kinds of random stuff, so I had no way of really going to get our horses yet.

Diana: So then, when did you finally feel it was safe to stay at home and go get your stuff?

Haley: We didn't have electricity until... I don't even remember! Three or four days, maybe. I remember, it must have been on the afternoon of the seventh. I started seeing if I could track down a generator because I wasn't sure when we would have electricity back. I didn't want to lose all of our meat in the freezer! So I think maybe the morning of the eighth, I was headed to get a generator. I think we got electricity not long after that. It must have been the night of the eighth that we went back to our house.

Diana: What is your most vivid memory of the fire?

Haley: Probably the time that I topped the hill and thought the fire was coming up our garage. I thought the garage was in flames. When we topped the hill and saw that fire, it was the realization that it was that close.

Diana: Do you remember any other wildfires? Have you ever been involved with any?

Haley: Wildfires? I remember growing up, my dad always had his 1,500 gallon tank that he would haul water to wheat pasture. He always had that rigged up with a motor on it so whenever there was, he could go haul water to the fire trucks. But I was never involved with it. Maybe just knowing it was around.

Diana: Did you ever think this fire would get this big?

Haley: Never.

Diana: What were your first feelings when you saw the north fire?

Haley: Shock. I couldn't put words to it, and almost still can't. It was just like, "Wait a second, where did this come from? We're supposed to be worried about the one from the south! And now there's another one? And another one?"

I remember, at one point, I was talking to my mom on the phone, and not jokingly said, "Mom, I think the world is coming to an end." I was serious. I really thought something was going down and it wasn't good. There was fire everywhere.

Diana: You couldn't escape it at all.

Haley: No. It felt like it was everywhere.

Diana: So do you remember the temperature shift?

Haley: I don't. I don't know when that happened, I just remember thinking, "Gosh, we are cold!" Then Dustin said, "Well, check the temperature to see how cold it is." By the time we got to my grandmother's, which was I

don't know, fifteen minutes, the hoses on our little yard sprayers were froze up. So we just dumped water on the little fire that we had.

Diana: Who were some of the people or agencies that were the most helpful?

Haley: Probably the people... everybody. Every person that helped in any way was the most helpful. It took absolutely everybody's efforts.

Mike Harden helped save my grandmother's house and did a tremendous job with the town work.

Scott Pike was kind of like an angel in the night. He showed up at Barrett's to help there for a little bit, and then later on, months later, I found out that he had helped at my grandmother's house. I just thought, "Where in the world did he come from, and how did he know where to be at the right time? It just took absolutely everybody and whatever that person could do, it helped.

Diana: Did you end up doing any volunteer work with anybody else? Or was it mainly taking care of your own?

Haley: It was mainly taking care of our own stuff. Between my mom and dad and my grandmother's place, our place and my brother's place, there was a lot of damage control that had to take place. Thankfully... we are very fortunate. We only lost grass. Dustin and I only lost grass. The damage to the fences...

Diana: No cattle?

Haley: We did not lose any cattle. They were all on wheat, so we are very, very fortunate.

Diana: So what was the physical toll?

Haley: About a week or so after the fire... I mean, after the fire, I don't think Dustin or I ever talked or had hardly even seen each other for a while there. About a week after, I said, "Man, I feel like I've aged five years."

He kind of looked at me and chuckled and said, "Try 15 or 20."

And I was like, "You're right!"

Diana: So what did your kids think of the fire? Do they have any memories? Or were they completely gone? Do they ask about it?

Haley: They mostly just... the little one was only 13 months, so she doesn't really have any memories or can't express that. Jacee is four, and she talks about... Whenever we talk about the fire, she says, "Rayna bit me" Her little sister bit her twice that night. I think all the emotions are raw, everybody is stressed out. I think the 13 month old was probably hungry, and wanted to eat. So unfortunately, she bit her sister!

In the days after the fire, we prayed a lot! Every time we sit down to eat, we naturally pray, so every time, we don't just "say" our prayer. At meal time, Jacee would say, "Mom, can we please pray for the people that lost their houses in the fire."

Of course we do that! So now, at random times, she will say, "Mom, can we pray for the people that lost their houses in the fire." I answer that we should pray for everybody else that was affected by the fire too. So that is kind of what she connects to it, that her sister bit her and that we need to pray for the people.

Diana: Pretty good deal! So, are you doing something to prepare in case there is another fire?

Haley: Yes. I think it is just the little things such as knowing what your belongings are. When you are in the moment, you don't know what to grab. You think your lives are the most valuable, and you can't think much beyond that.

I said, "Grab the guns and the diamonds!" We don't have a lot of guns, and we certainly don't have a lot of diamonds, but those are the things I knew for sure I wanted. Beyond that, I didn't know what to grab. We

grabbed baby books and pictures that we had printed. Thankfully today, we have technology, but I think that is the biggest thing, when you have to grab stuff to go, knowing what you want to take. That is the bare minimum of what you can do. Beyond that? Like ranch-management wise? I think it good to be thinking about what fire breaks you can put in place or know where you can go with cattle and how to move those cattle quickly.

Diana: Where your resources are. I thought of something else a while ago, are there any positive things that you perceive as coming out of this fire?

Haley: There has been a lot of positive things. Relationships have been mended. The country has aided in our need; I mean the entire ag community. And not just the ag; I think people in general, the whole entire country has answered the call of supporting our community and our little county and the panhandles. I mean Texas and Oklahoma too. Just that there are still good in a lot of people out there. There is a lot of positive out of this tragedy.

Diana: Did you learn about people that you could rely on that you didn't know you could before?

Haley: Yes, I think we all know who our friends are and who we can rely on. I think even there are hidden heroes that you never even thought would be there but are there. I don't know, people just let their issues go and helped.

Diana: So, on Monday, do you remember seeing any firetrucks?

Haley: Tell me what the date was on Monday. I don't remember.

Diana: On March 6.

Haley: I didn't see any firetrucks.

Diana: They were all down in the southwest part of the county and in Meade and Englewood and probably south down there.

Haley: I honestly don't remember.

Diana: Were the first ones you saw the Colorado ones that came?

Haley: I hadn't thought about that, but... I think in that night when we were all over that night, I saw a lot of flashing lights that I'm assuming were fire trucks. But actually with my own eyes, "Saw the truck?" Probably yes, that next day. We had local guys. That next day, it was just me and the two girls at our house. I thought I could manage the two girls by myself and stand guard at our house. I had a little hot spot and some places that weren't burned yet, so that kind of made me nervous, because again, it was like 50 yards from the house. I called then into the command center to ask if I could have a truck. They sent a local guy, so we had locals in and out and we had the forestry guys.

Diana: So how close did it get to your house? Did you have a lot of burn north of you?

Haley: To the north of my house, it was probably a quarter mile. To the east of my house, about the same. South of my house, 20 yards. It burned up into our yard; it came within ten feet of the porch, but our grass was so short in the yard that it wasn't too much of a risk. On the west side of my house, 20 or 30 yards and that was... it didn't burn a lot of grass right there.

Diana: So, did you have a lot of fence to fix?

Haley: Lots of endless fencing. Good quality time with my husband!

Diana: Did you have volunteers help tear fence out?

Haley: Yes, there have been many volunteers. Lots of new friendships built too. Another positive that's come out of this is...

Diana: Do you know where they're from?

Haley: We've had a family come from the Concordia area, we still stay in contact with them through Facebook. My brother had a family come from Alabama, he had some volunteers from Alabama. We're still in contact with them through Facebook. Illinois, Iowa... I think that's about the end of what has been directly helped Dustin and my brother. Jule's had a lot more than that, but what I've met...

Diana: Did your dad have some from Canada?

Haley: My dad has had many. I think my mom and dad and I haven't really talked a lot about the fire because they've been so busy with their... damage control hasn't allowed us to talk a lot about how it has impacted one another.

He's had a lot of volunteers and a lot of touching stories come from his experiences. Which is great.

Diana: So what is the biggest thing that you remember out of the fire altogether?

Haley: The biggest thing altogether... just pray and do what you can. You just have to pray for safety and your neighbor's safety and do what you can to fight it. If you don't do what you can, then the next guy's gotta do what they can, and it might be bigger at that point.

Diana: Have you ever heard of a fire like this before?

Haley: No. The Anderson Creek fire, which was like a year ago was awful, and it didn't even impact me directly. I just remember thinking how awful it was for them and what we could do to help them. I never imagined it was going to happen to us just a year later.

Diana: Do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd like to share?

Haley: It isn't a matter of "if" it's going to happen again. It is a matter of "when" it's going to happen again, and what we can do to be ready for it. We know it's going to do it again.

Diana: Thank you for taking the time to come and give an interview and tell us your story. We appreciate you guys' efforts and gathering all the information!