

Mark Gardiner

Diana: Today is July 9, 2018. What is your name?

Mark: My name is Mark Gardiner and I live 12 miles southwest of Ashland, Kansas.

Diana: What is your occupation?

Mark: I'm a rancher.

Diana: How old are you?

Diana: I'm 57 years old.

When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as "the fire?"

Mark: On March 6, 2017, we were working cattle. Of course, it was a very windy, dirty day. We smelled smoke and this was about noon or 12:30. Being the elder statesman of the group that was working cattle, I said, "I'll go see if I can find it." I could see that it was to the west from the smoke, so I headed towards Englewood. I could see it was really black west of Englewood, so I just kept going on what I would call Harry Walker's road.

I went over to Harry's place, Rick and Harry were there. We could see where the fire was; you could actually see the flames. We knew that it was over by Frosty Ediger's, which was substantially further west. I would estimate it was 15, maybe 20 miles, west. But we were up above and we could see that it was there. Harry being very wise and experienced, I said, "What do you think Harry? With this wind and everything, the best thing we can probably do is stay out of the way?" And he said, "Yes, I think so." Because at that time, it was blowing 70 miles an hour, pretty much predominantly out of the south.

So the fire was heading north and this was at approximately 12:30 p.m. or a quarter to 1 on March 6. We made the decision that we were probably going to be okay, we would stay out of their way. So I turned around and I went back and told my crew, Ransom, Cole, Grant, Kayla and some interns, I said, "It's okay, it's west of us and the fire is going straight north."

Diana: So which part of the ranch were you on?

Mark: I was actually at what we call the headquarters. We were working calves at what we would call our bull development center. Eva and I had talked. She had actually been to the vet clinic that day, but she was home so I went to tell her about the fire. This would have been about 1:30 p.m. So when I got home, I said, "Well, this fire is west of us."

Shortly thereafter, she received a call from Mary Cox who was very distraught. I was eating lunch while I was there, so I estimate that was 2 or 2:15. I said, "Mary, I just drove by your house. It's fine." She was very distraught because her house had burned down. I said, "Mary, are you there?" She said, "Oh, no, I'm in Ashland, but they told me my house is burned down." She was upset, so and Eva and I told her we'd go back and look. So we got in the pickup and headed back. All of us around here would know the Angle Road, which is actually the road between Ashland and Englewood.

So we got back on the Angle Road and we were actually right about at the Gabbert Ranch house and we looked out across there and it was, "Oh, my God. There it is."

I'm estimating this was at 2:30 or a quarter till 3. We could see flames many, many feet high for as far as you could see. We turned around and went back. As we went back, we called on our cell phone and told all of our kids that were still working cattle to get the horses and get out of there. "Where should we go?" "Go, we don't care. Just get out there."

So we headed back to our house. We had a couple of dogs that were left in the house. All of the horses but two were with the crew. We still had two horses at the barn that we were going to try and get out of the way. So we literally got back to our house and I'm estimating again, in that quarter to 3, 3:00 range. The fire hit our house just as we got there, and from this point forward, in my mind, this all happened at night because it was black.

Diana: Could you see to get back from the Gabbert to your house?

Mark: We could and we'd got to our place at the exact same time the flames were just 30 feet away from our house.

Diana: So had you talked to Greg yet?

Mark: We had told him to get out of there and we were going after the horses. While the kids were grabbing a trailer, he jumped in one of the pickups with another trailer and he was trying to follow us down there. I didn't know that until later when he told me he was coming.

I said, "We're going to go down there; we'll get them out." We had another trailer there; we were going to hook up and get them out of there. But I had told all of our people to get the heck out of Dodge. A lot of our men, Scott Tune, Landon Borgeldt, and Steven Nicodemas, they were all firefighters. So they knew more than we did, originally.

Diana: Were you able to talk with them?

Mark: Not very much, because we didn't want to bother them. They had texted us to get the hell out of there. But this was all happening at about the same time.

Diana: When you came back to your house, were you and Eva in one vehicle?

Mark: We were together.

Diana: And then you split up and did different things?

Mark: Yes. She takes care of the horses and she thought they would come to her. She went down there and she got them up into the pens. I was trying to get some things out of the house and get the dogs out of the house. She came back into the house at almost the exact same time as I got in there. That doesn't quite jive, even though she went down to the barn. I know I went into the house at almost the same time. I had ahold of one of the dogs and I think she did too, but they were so scared we couldn't hold onto them. At that point in time, the house was on fire and it was filling with smoke. There was the roar of the fire. There was this noise.

Diana: Could you see?

Mark: We could still see at that point. There was a lot of smoke, but you could see.

Diana: Could you hear each other?

Mark: No, I was yelling for her and her pickup was parked on the north side of our house. You could see out the window to see that. I looked out the window. She tells me that she had not left yet, but to me, the hand of God was with us the whole time. I looked out the window and I was yelling for Eva, "We've got to go; we've got to go." I looked out there and I did not see her pickup, so I thought, "She's gone. She has left. I need to do the same." But there were a few things that I thought that we should get. We had pictures on our bedroom dresser of the boys, and ever since we met, we've written each other letters. We had a box of letters to each other in there. So I grabbed the pictures that I could and I grabbed that box of letters. As I was running out, I noticed (probably because we had never put them up) but the boys had graduated the year before from K-State and their diplomas, and more importantly, their honor cords from graduation were there and I grabbed those. I knew that the dogs were gone. I mean I couldn't get them because by that time everything was really on fire. The irony of all this is when I opened the door, at that point I couldn't see any more. It was black. The firemen told me that the speed of the fire was probably, the wind was 70 to 80 miles an hour. With the energy of the fire, it was maybe 90 to 100 miles an hour, it was fast. Where our house was, the lawn had been mowed, so there wasn't as much fuel. So those flames, I kind of hopped over that. But in my memory, everything is black except for the orange fire. Where there was fuel, those were 60 to 80 feet tall flames.

Diana: So when you left, did you go with the fire or did you go against the fire?

Mark: I went into it and jumped over it on our lawn because it wasn't that tall there. My pickup was parked on the gravel road. So that's what kept it from being damaged. I had a 30 year old hat, and this had a little fun with it. I fell as I was running out of there. I'm not quite as athletic as I used to be. I tripped over something trying to carry all this stuff and my hat just blew off or went right into the flames. I was kind of proud of that hat; I'd had it for 30 years. I'm thinking, "I don't really need that hat that bad." They teased me, "You couldn't even keep your hat on." But I remember opening up the passenger door, because I was pointed to the southwest. I threw those things in there and the wind blew and kind of sprung the door. Later on, I looked down and I wondered, "What are those holes in the seat?" Oh, yeah, the sparks had burned several holes in there.

But I got around and I got in the pickup. At that time it was totally black. I'll back up a little bit, our house didn't have a garage. A lot of times during the winter, I'd leave in the dark and of course there would be frost. I like to get up there pretty early and I kind of made fun of it. Eva said, "You're just a doofus," but a lot of times rather than waiting for my windshield to defrost, I would just open my door and follow the gravel out. She said, "You're an idiot." I said, "Yeah, I know, but it's kind of fun." I just follow the road every day down to the barn to go to work. Well, you never know what God is preparing you for. That's how I got out of there because I could not see a single thing other than by cracking the door I could follow the gravel road out. That's how I got out of there. I don't know the exact time, but Eva was gone by the time I left. She went to the wheat field and really I knew at that point that the fire had passed that area. I assumed that the barn had some issues, but there was a way for me to circle back to the west. So I circled back because the fire had already been through there and I got back down there. The house, there was nothing you could do at that point, but the barn was on fire in a couple different locations. We still had some water there, so I went back and I was actually throwing water on that.

Eva came back and found me and subsequently Ransom. Greg thought we were all dead. He showed up rather upset and called me a son of a gun or something like that. I knew where I was, why shouldn't everybody else? So we got that taken care of.

Diana: So where did the kids go?

Mark: They took the horses. They were talking to people on cell phones and the pickup that had all the horses ended up going to the Buffalo Vet Clinic. Then they ended up evacuating Buffalo. One of the interns was from near Oklahoma City and they made the decision just to go to her parent's house with all the horses. That's where they went, the interns. Ransom was with me, because he had circled back to help. And Cole and Kayla, his wife now, Kayla Sandival at the time, they had tried to come back and they sent those kids on with the horses. But at that point in time, they were in Ashland because that's where they evacuated to. Of course, Ashland was then evacuated to Coldwater. So they actually snuck back little sooner than they were supposed to, but they did not get back until the next morning. So we were at the barn probably, at that point in time, at 4:30 or 5 p.m. We circled back and part of what was going on, I had told them we had some pens where the fire was going to go through. I had told them to try to turn the cattle out, which in retrospect would have been the wrong thing to do. They couldn't do it because the fire hit right as they were trying to do it.

The good side of that was, we had some losses in those pens, but the majority of it came through there so quick. The flames, there wasn't that much to burn in the pens. So a lot of those cattle got singed and we worried about smoke inhalation, but they didn't have any issues. So our major losses did not occur in the pens. They were actually safer there than any of the cattle that were on grass. Most of the people in that area at that time had evacuated to the green wheat fields and let that pass. As time kind of all runs together, the fire at this point was to the east of us. We were trying to put out fire and trying to do what we could to communicate with people. We got it stopped in a few little areas.

I know it was in the middle of the night, before we had a chance to get there, but I remember hearing on the cell phone (everybody was talking to everybody) but they were saying, "Ashland's in trouble." I said to Eva, "I don't know that we can do anything, but I think we should go there." I remember, I would call it coming around the Berryman Hill on the Angle Road. It looked like what I assume the Alamo looked like because it was just surrounded by flames and all the fire trucks that you have ever seen, ever.

Later on, I complimented the firemen saying, "You did a good job of saving Ashland." They said, "Well, Mike Harden probably did a better job of saving Ashland with a disk." We realized we couldn't do anything there, so I said we'd better go over to the Dunne Ranch because nobody had been there. It had already passed through there. This was approaching midnight now and as we came in from the east on that headquarters road, you could just see the glow and the huge flames. Eva and I didn't say anything to each other, but I'm thinking, "This isn't good. It's all gone."

There's two houses there and lots of outbuildings. They're approaching... They're certainly 80 or 90 years old. They are all wood. Miracle of all miracles, when we got there, we had some hay stacked there and it was on fire and all the trees were on fire but the houses and the barn were not on fire. There was one small garage that was on fire and we actually got enough water to at least hold it at bay. At that point we got the message through, it was the Smith boys. It was Englewood.

Diana: Scott Tune.

Mark: Well, he wasn't with them.

Diana: Did he come later?

Mark: The Smith boys were there and they came and got it put out.

Diana: So where did you get the water that you had before? Like at the barn. Did you have a

hydrant?

Mark: Yes, we had a hydrant. We hadn't lost our water, for whatever reason.

Diana: How did you bring the water up?

Mark: I just turned the hydrant on and took a bucket and was throwing it at it. I didn't have a hose or anything.

Diana: It's not a windmill or something like that?

Mark: No, and there wasn't enough pressure. I mean, it wasn't lots of water but it was enough to contain it both at the Dunne Ranch and at our place.

Diana: So you didn't really have a rig that had water on the back, a supply tank.

Mark: We had sent that with some of our crew that were trying to fight things. All we all had was a shovel and bags and the water we could access with a bucket.

Diana: Did you have any gunny sacks? Are they kind of hard to come by?

Mark: They're not as frequent. When I fought fire as a kid, they were all over the place. That's what we did, you wet those down and you went and beat them. I say gunny sacks, but we just had some old shirts and jeans and different things that we used like a gunny sack. I didn't actually have a true gunny sack. I don't suppose we've had those for 25 years, but the good side of that was Eric Campbell lived there. He was nowhere close, and his family had evacuated. Of course, there was no power, but I knew they had a lot of pets and their kids had pets. We used our cellphone for a flashlight. We were able to get their cats and dogs out of there. Especially after losing our dogs, I felt good that those little kids weren't going to have to lose their pets. We saved a couple of our cats that stayed at the horse barn. So all of those special animals, we took to the vet clinic the next day and told them to take care of them, because we couldn't. We got those out of there. At this point in time, by the time Englewood got the fire out at the Dunne headquarters, a friend of mine kept texting me. His name is Donnell Brown from Throckmorton, Texas. He was up in the area, at Woodward actually, for a cattleman's meeting. He's a very close and dear friend and he's like, "What can I do to help?" I go, "I don't know. Where are you?" He actually went to our house, he knew how to get there. Somehow, he and Ransom got together. Ransom brought him over to the Dunne headquarters. Think about, you know, back at 3 or 3:30 when all this started. It was 85 or 88 degrees; it was hotter than heck.

Diana: Did you notice a temperature drop?

Mark: Oh yeah. And that's where I'm headed for, is like, Donald got there probably at 1 or 2 in the morning. And, "What can I do? What can I do to help?" At that point, I'm freezing to death. I don't remember, it felt like it was 25 degrees.

Diana: It was close.

Mark: I said, "I'd really like a coat!"

Diana: Did he have an extra one?

Mark: He did. He even had a coat for Eva and he had a cap that I could have. But he was coming

from this cattlemen's meeting and they were having steaks and everything. We all learned about all the precious supplies everybody brought us, but he had all the steaks that he gave the firemen and they ate steak. He had gallons and gallons of bottled water that everybody had.

Diana: Do you know about how many people you fed down there on the Dunne?

Mark: There were three trucks and I'm assuming that there were 20 plus, maybe more, but they were the firemen and Eva and I and Ransom. At that point, it had already gone through everywhere and so we headed back. There were little fires all over the place and on the north side of the ranch near Acres, there was a fire. There was a small white house where Monty Ediger used to live. We thought we had that stopped when we left. It was nothing big to stop, but we did get it stopped and saved that house. That was about three or four in the morning.

Diana: So were you out all night?

Mark: Yes. We basically watched the sun come up. You know, I obviously was never in any war, but it felt like... Because it's over there, and then my God! I mean the sky lit up to the north and here it comes from the north. The sky lit up to the east of me, it was just like these big flares. You could just see it for miles and miles.

Diana: Did the wind change? Did it go down?

Mark: Well, obviously changed from when it was at Frosty Ediger's. It changed out of the south and basically came out of the west, blowing right out of us.

Diana: Was there a change in how fast it was blowing?

Mark: Like earlier in the morning, did it kind of die down?

Mark: It doesn't seem like it, I mean it was still really, really windy, but it wasn't 70 or 80 miles an hour at night. Then it was probably 20 or 30 mile an hour. I know to the north of us, we have a bunch of grass up there and that all flared up. That was when the wind switched and came out of the north. I know that it switched several more times. Well, the irony, you know, of our house being gone pretty quick while my brother, who lives on the highway, his house got approached from the north, the east, the west, and the south. He and the firemen saved it, but it all burned right up to the edge of it. He had a lot more anxiety about losing his house. I didn't, it was already over, what we did.

So you think about that. I remember the next morning, you could see mainly the flames were to the east. I went over to our relatives, the Arnolds, and it had already gone by there. They had not had the cattle losses that we had, but most of their grass and fences had been burned. They were calving, and they had a lot of their cattle up around their facilities. Of course, those were kind of feed grounds, so there wasn't much fuel there to burn. So I believe that's of the reasons they didn't have the issues.

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

Mark: You know, on one hand there's many memories. Greg did some media things that were on YouTube or whatever. I like to tease him, "It's a good thing I didn't watch that before all that, I'd have been scared." I knew it was a serious situation but I was calm about it. "This is what we need to do now." And I just think that's a little bit, obviously Henry and Nan taught us well on lots of things. But in my daily job, part of my main job is handling chaos. So I think my reaction to it, was

what I hoped it would have been. It was like, "Only control what you can control." Everybody was upset about all the cattle that were lost and everything, but I had several jobs and one most of all was to not get rattled and to give an example that we're going to focus on the living. We're going to take care of them.

But back to your original question, probably getting out of the house and getting through that wall of black and seeing that the love of my life was okay. We got back together at the barn. I had no problems. You know, all my family is alive and all these people in this community. We obviously lost one person that was not from here and that's terrible for him and his family. There were six other lives that were lost, but I've said many times that is the greatest blessing of my life. I'm not saying that to be a mock humble. It focuses you on what matters, what's important. It's just stuff. Even to this day, there's people come up to me and go, "I'm so sorry." "What are you sorry about?" "Well, you lost so much." "I didn't lose anything, it's just stuff."

Diana: What do you miss most of that stuff? Is there anything that you've gone to look for and said, "Oh." I was going to get something and, "Oh, I don't have that anymore."

Mark: Well, I had a good hat that I liked a lot. It was like, "That was my good hat!" Really, again I'm not trying to... I mean it was a lot of stuff and it was valuable, but it was just stuff. So when you think about your three boys are fine, that your brothers are fine, the people of your community are fine. I kind of missed the fences all summer, because every time I wanted to move some cattle, out of the blue, we can't go there. We don't have any fence.

Eva, I've joked with her and said, "We could just live in the apartment where we're living. And she said, "Nice try. I love you, but I want a home." I don't care about stuff. I care about family and this community. So, yeah, my good hat. People got me a hat almost right away, customers did.

Diana: Straw?

Mark: They got me a nice felt hat. I bought my own straw hat when summer came.

Diana: So you mentioned the loss of fences. When did you start going around the ranch and assessing the damage?

Mark: We did that as the sun came up the next morning.

Diana: Did you do it together?

Eva and I were together. Greg and the boys, I sent the boys and Kayla and the interns, remember, they didn't get back probably until after lunch or afternoon on Tuesday. I said, "Take the horses." These are the areas where the most cattle were. Eva and I went through the whole ranch and there were dead cattle everywhere and injured cattle. Greg and Phillip Messer from Ashland that we grew up together with, a dear friend, Phillip has been in law enforcement all these years. There was nothing to keep him from coming here. So he was with Greg and said, "What do you need?" I said, "Bullets." So Philip helped Greg put down cows. That's a tough loss. I still feel guilty that I couldn't save those cows. That bugs me more than my hat because that's my job. I remember thinking while it was going on, "They'll be okay." Because during the Anderson Creek Fire, there were lots of friends and customers that didn't really have cattle losses. But their fire wasn't quite as fast moving. I remember thinking, "Well, they'll get out of the way." But as we were going around the next morning and you could see the deer, the coyotes, and the rabbits. If they couldn't get out of the way, the cattle couldn't either.

Diana: Were they completely consumed in the fire? A lot of them, it just killed them right off?

Mark: You could see where some of them got caught up and a fence would stop them and they all died right there. They were trying to run away, but you would find survivors all over. Our rule was, if they could see and they could travel and they could eat, we would give them a chance. We had a pasture on the Cimarron River that 228 pregnant cows there. They went down there and they came out with 22 cows. That was actually one of the better survival rates at 10 percent. Those cows are special to us in that amazingly enough, the majority of them made it. The majority of them still calved. They still have their battle scars. They have a special place in our hearts. That was the challenge, going back to the things I lost, just the animals, our dogs and the cows.

Diana: This is March and you always have a sale the first part of April. So you're dealing with a lot of losses but you've also got to get ready for the sale.

Mark: It was three weeks away.

Diana: Did you have extra people come in and help you work on that? Did you lose a lot of cattle that you had planned to sell?

Mark: We lost about 150 because they had been turned out on grass. Early on, we determined, with the help of the Ashland Vet Clinic, that these cattle were going to be healthy. I said to Randall Spare, "What do we need to watch for? He said, "If they have smoke issues, they'll act like a respiratory." They didn't. We watched them very closely, so we made the announcement. I'm not really much of a Facebooker, but we do have a Facebook page. I have people that help me with it. I think it was by Wednesday night that, "The sale is on, we'll go forward." We had some challenges, but everything was fine and everything was in order.

The things that we did differently, going back to the great blessing, the next morning it was overwhelming. There were people from many, many locations. Lots of them were our customers and friends from many states away. They were there. They were there to help them with supplies. They were there with feed. As far as preparing, you know there were so many crews that came in to help. I remember talking to Kendall Kay and Randall Spare, "The intensity of this is going to wear off after a week and we're going to be on our own, so we need to be organized in this." We have a large projects on the ranch, so we're used to that, and lots of people would come in. Our belief was we needed to exert some leadership. It was like, "We're good. We've got 50 people here, let's go help this person. He won't ask for help and he's struggling." So we would send them to places where we knew people needed help.

Back to losing the intensity after a week, even to this day, what is it, July 9? There are still people that are helping. Obviously, it went on all summer and all fall and through the spring.

Diana: Did you find that the people that came to volunteer to help pushed you to get some stuff started and going? Or were you self-started? I mean did you say, "We've got to take care of this," or did they push you into doing things?

Mark: We had a plan. I don't want to belittle their tremendous effort, but we had to organize them into a direction to where we would get something done and it wasn't just chaos. We had a plan and they helped and they certainly gave us enough manpower to go do things. A lot of it was as much as just picking up all the destroyed fence and picking up the destroyed outbuildings. Where we could, the dead cattle we had to pile up. That was mainly us that did that. We dug some holes to mass bury them. The overwhelming, I can't give you the right words to tell you. I knew people were good. I just didn't know they were that good. And the fact that they kept coming, I mean I had classmates

and people that I hadn't seen since high school. Brad Butler, he and his family came. I had college professors and classmates that came and kids from K-State and Oklahoma State.

I won't say that they pushed us, but I will say they truly helped us and we knew a lot of those people that had leadership skills. Dave Nichols from Kansas State was one of my professors. I'd say, "Dave, you take these kids and you go over here and do this." It just gave us some relief. You know, there's only so many of us, and it's the same way for the whole community. There's only so many of us, so we could have them exert that leadership to get something done. So we were very fortunate that way.

There's a well-known veterinarian at K-State by the name of Dr. Mike Apley. He's a special vet and he's done lots of very high powered things. He ran a skid loader for a week for us, unloading hay for all the supplies that people were sending in. The people that were bringing all this, obviously Ashland Feed and Seed did a tremendous job accepting all the resources. Englewood had a location there and we're kind of halfway between Englewood and Ashland. We had a community drop just across the road in a big wheatfield, just south of Henry's house. You know, that's where all of our community and all of our neighbors came and got their stuff. You know, it's there, it's there for everybody. Come and get it. But Mike unloaded those trucks for over a week.

Diana: So you've been talking about people, who were some of the other people or agencies that proved to be most helpful?

Mark: The Community Foundation. I'm thinking all our fences are gone and I know what fence costs per mile. I'm going, five years, ten years? It'll take us ten years to put that back and pay for it. When you look at it the funds that were generated by the Ashland Community Foundation, when you look at the funds that were generated by the Kansas Livestock Association, and when you look at the funds that were generated by the Working Ranch Cowboys Association, and then when you look at the funds that customers and friends and neighbors and total strangers sent to us, it is overwhelming. That was real cash and we couldn't have put the infrastructure back without it.

We lost 270 miles of fence and that 270 miles, if you do all back and total replacement, that's \$10,000 a mile. So the Stockgrowers State Bank gave us an emergency line of credit. They gave us a reduced interest rate and they gave us permission. Obviously, we didn't know what funds were coming. They kept saying, "Get going, get going!" To a certain extent, you put your head down and go. You believe in the Lord and have faith that we'll get through this. One of the things that we said or I said from day one is, "I don't know how we're going to do this but we will." And we did. I would say that's what all of Ashland and Clark County did. That's why I'm so proud of this community. Nobody did anything except keep going and get back up and go to work. You know, one of the things that we tried to do is, and I'm not trying to be boastful about this, but people react to these things in different ways. So my friends, Randall Spare and Kendall Kay, would tell me about people that were struggling. I'd just call them and talk to them. "Hey, what can we get you that you need?"

You know, Vince Isenbart's been our neighbor and friend for all my life. I promised I wasn't going to get emotional, but I still get emotional about this as far as, you know, we lost 600 cows. Vince lost all of his cows. I cried more tears over Vince's cows. I said, "Vince, we're going to get you what you need and get you put back together." No, we're all in this together. When I talk about our family, I mean this is a community that is so special. We're all a family and it's worth fighting for. I joke about how we get along as a family. I just tell the truth, we don't, but at the end of the day, you either get along and figure it out, or not. That's the way Ashland is. I've never been more proud. You know how you hear about the Greatest Generation and those people and what they went through, then you look at my father's generation and my mother. Do we have any resemblance at all

to those people? Today I would say, "Yes, we do."

Diana: I'd say the fire brought it out. So let's talk about fire. You've lived here all your life and you've known wildfires, not anything quite like this, but is there a history of wildfires or dealing with wildfires in your family that's been carried down?

Mark: You know, there have been wildfires every year of my life since I've been here. We get calls from what I'd have to call "tree huggers" or whatever, "Do you think this is global warming?" I said, "No, I think this is a unique set of circumstances that came together for a once in a century occurrence." We always had wildfires, but they were very limited and they were in a very small location. Of course all the ranchers would run to it to contain it quickly. But if you think about the drought from essentially 2008 and especially 2011. In many ways, up to 2015 and then you look at the 28 inches in 2016. Well, that doesn't ever happen. We had the greatest grass crop ever. I actually remember thinking all spring and winter, that's a lot of fuel out there. That's not what we're used to. We don't normally get that kind of rainfall.

One of the reasons we had so many losses on grass was that we'd saved that grass to take our spring-calving cows there. You save that to keep it fresh and have more forage for them. We had just put them in there a week or two before, so there was lots of forage there. But if you study history and you look at the Indian history or even the pioneer history, there were fires and the Indians would set fires on purpose so the buffalo would follow that. They weren't this large because there wasn't that confluence of circumstances that happened to make the devastating fire that happened.

Diana: Do you think the CRP land had something to help with this?

Well, probably. If we'd had the wheat fields that were here in the 60's and 70's there wouldn't have been this continuous range land. But you know, in 1885 or 1884 when this community was settled, that was all range land. I think the difference was, we do lots of things management-wise to preserve our grass, conserve our grass, and to ration our grass. Because of that rain and because of that fuel, the CRP was part of that, but I think it was the rain and a lot of it was our better management practices. Dad always had a rule to take half, leave half as far as the grass. Not to say anything about anybody on how they do the best they can. People that run their ground a little harder because they don't have much grass, they didn't lose as much because there wasn't as much to burn. That's just a fact.

Diana: It is. So what effect, physical, financial, emotional, did the fire cause for you, the community, or the surrounding area? Was there a little bit of each? Or is one of them overwhelming?

Mark: I say to this day that I was led out of the fire by the hand of God and my family was too. I can be a little sarcastic and a little bit cynical. You know, I've always thought people were good. I said it earlier, but I didn't know they were this good. I think what gets us is that we all have to deal with people that have issues. You hear all that noise out of such a few, few minorities. The people out there with their head down working and doing God's work, you don't hear from them, because they're doing what I'd say Kansas people do: doing their job and keeping their mouth shut. The overwhelming understanding that we needed help and God sent these people to help us. That's a fact I'll never forget. You think about the emotional toll of it. I know people today that are still scarred. They won't talk about it, they even have a kind of PTSD over it. I don't mind telling you, on March 5 this year when that came up, it was, "You've got to be kidding me." It was kind of like you just come right back there when that fire came through on 160. Losing 500 acres wasn't a big deal! But it was like, "You've got to be kidding. This is not funny." So we all kind of jumped back.

Diana: And the response was amazing.

It was kind of like there was a fire just a few days after the big fire up on what I would call the Pauline Baker place. There wasn't any way that fire was getting away. There were about a hundred trucks there. The fact of the overwhelming effort of the firemen-- a lot of them were so shook up and a lot of them are my friends. I said, "You did great." And they'd go, "We never lost a house before." But you didn't lose anything, look at what you saved! Look at what you did. They were touched by that in different ways. What I've come to learn and appreciate, why I don't really dwell on stuff that we lost. Other people, that hits them in different ways. I try to be positive and I try to help them and also understand that they're going to react differently than say I may react. But ultimately, it's a blessing and it's a blessing for this community just to know how important we are to each other. Dad had a rule and we try to follow that rule to this day, "If you don't do business at home, you won't have a home." I think that's been brought home. You think about tragedies. You think about challenges other people have, and we've always tried to help and we've tried to do it quietly. But you know when things happen now, even as you look back at tragedies we've have before, did we do enough? When the Montana fire hit, we sent as much as we possibly could, same thing with Oklahoma. But it just makes us be more present and more mindful that other people need help too, and not just ones who live in Ashland, Kansas.

Mark: So can you perceive that anything positive that's resulted from the fire?

Mark: We've got the greatest fences in the history of my life. Our infrastructure was old. Most of the fences were older than me. Today, those fences will outlive me and hopefully will provide the infrastructure. I think there's lots of positives. The fact that we work together, we care about each other, and we help our neighbor. We lost 7,000 big bales of hay. We had 7,500 or 8,000 bales delivered specifically to us, to mention another nearly 15,000 bales for our community pile from all over the United States.

Who would have thought that was possible? I spend every day working with customers much like you do. Probably 50 percent or greater of all the help we got, or certainly a high percent, I'm just guessing, came from our customers. One of them told me, "You've always helped us. It's our turn." We're pretty good at giving help. We're not that good at receiving it. That was hard. I don't have the right words, but we're so thankful for all that they did. I didn't realize they cared that much or they were that present. That's the blessing of it all. Just to know how good the United States is, certainly agriculture and certainly rural America. I get teased a lot of times when people come out here, "What do you ever do in Ashland, Kansas?" I go, "Everything I've wanted to. It's a good place."

Diana: So what can you do or have you done to prepare for a future fire or other emergency events?

Mark: Well, we've always pretty cognizant and aware, but we've done some things with fireguards, farming some fireguard strips and things. We'll do a little more of that. We haven't done anything with our house yet, but we're planning on putting some sprinklers around it to where you could turn that on if it happened. The biggest thing is just to have some variation to where the fuel isn't all continuous. I would contend that these circumstances shouldn't occur again. They could, but the biggest thing is we had lots of those fireguard strips and things. We'll do more of that.

Diana: So what about the community?

Oh, I think kind of the same things. We probably need to be a little more present as far as, you know, we all love our rangeland, but to inter-mediate with some fireguards and even around our structures maybe. It costs a little bit more to have some water resources, but I know people that

saved their house because of it. Mike McCarty saved his because he had sprinklers around his house.

I think just watching out for our neighbor and being aware of our neighbor. But I don't think there are great answers to it all other than I think we need to just be cognizant of those conditions. Just like the March fire of 2018. It didn't take long for the cavalry to put that out, not that that was near as big as the other one. I remember growing up, I'd never seen a big tornado. Then when Greensburg happened, that got a lot more real. So I pay attention to tornadoes. So, "Oh, there's a fire, let's go put it out." Well, we have a little more presence now. We're going to attack it. So I think just that presence and cognizance that, "This could be really bad." You know, when you're 15 or 25, you're pretty immortal. When you get more mature, like we are now, it's like, "Better pay attention and provide some leadership for the next generation."

You know these things, these things can happen. I always heard about the depression and the Dirty Thirties and if you broke an egg you were going to go under. I was like, "Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Well, we're a little more present that bad things can happen, so we just need to be aware.

Diana: So you go and do speaking engagements for the different organizations that you are a part of. How have you been able to share the story of this fire and make a difference with other places around the world?

Mark: I don't want this to sound boastful in any way, but giving my normal cattle talks anymore is getting kind of mundane. I've probably given a dozen talks about the fire and talked about various components here. But it really touches people when I tell them that people are good. People care. You're part of those people and when you look at how God sent all those people and all those precious resources from people who didn't have them to give but they did anyway. The reality of people understanding that they can make a difference is how I've been able to share that. When I said I don't want to be boastful, I haven't given a lot talks prior to the last couple of years where they're all crying and giving me a standing ovation. I tease my buddies, actually Randall, Kendall, and I, they wanted us to talk to the Kansas Ag Conference. During that whole time, us three are very close. We were checking on each other all the time and doing what we had to do in our areas. I'd never heard their stories and they'd never heard my story.

So when we were up there on that stage together, Kendall had a little... He held it together, but I'm going, "This is going to be a problem." Then Randall, he's kind of like me, he's emotional. I'm going, "Oh, God. You're going to lose it, Mark." One of the things that I've learned, we grow up, we're rough, we're tough. We're Ashland Bluejays, we don't show emotion. It's okay to show that you're human, to realize that. So I've probably been able to share that better than I was before because I'm so tremendously thankful for all the people did. I think it's made people feel good that they could help in some way. So when we share that, we share that passion for this community and then we share the fact that you can do that too, wherever you are.

I gave a talk to a set of high-powered retail beef people for the certified Angus Beef Conference. They really wanted me to talk about the fire, and my main point to them was that relationships matter. I've said to Kendall and I've said to Randall, "How come we got so much help?" They said they think it is because so many people in this community have relationships all over and have treated people the right way.

As I told them, "Whether you're selling bulls or beef, no government entity is going to come in there and save you. Nobody is going to make you whole. Nobody expects that." But relationships and people matter. I think that's the take-home message that I have learned from all this. That group of people raised a tremendous amount of funds and sent that to the Ashland Community

Foundation. I was shocked at what they did and I was, once again, also thankful for it. There were people from New York City and Chicago, you don't have to be born in a dugout in Clark County, Kansas, to be a good person. What I've come to understand is that people are good all over. To share that and to share the passion that we have for this community and for this way of life. I think it has touched people in ways that I didn't know that it could. It's touched me in ways that I didn't know it could. I can still see those cows that we had to shoot. I can still see the dog that I couldn't hold onto, but I get to go home to my family and my wife.

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

Mark: You know, this is probably redundant, but this is a good place and these are good people.