

Jerome Berryman

Diane: So what is your name?

Jerome: My name is Jerome Berryman.

Diane: Where do you live?

Jerome: 438 West Sixth Street.

Diane: How old are you?

Jerome: Forty-one years old.

Diane: Good. What's your occupation?

Jerome: I'm a store owner here in Ashland, Bison Mercantile, retail appliances, televisions, bedroom stuff.

Diane: Okay, when did you first become aware of the fire that's known as the Starbuck Fire that began on March 6th, 2017?

Jerome: Well, I had my radio at work, I was at work by myself that day. I knew it was bad conditions. The previous week, there was a yard fire because somebody mowed their yard, so we knew conditions were bad out there and the wind was already blowing.

One of the first things I did, is I opened up the store and then I printed off a sign saying, "Closed Due to Fire".

I started hearing some chatter probably around 11:30 or so. Englewood had been called out, and I was kind of listening in on that when I wasn't with customers.

Diane: How did that make you feel, that you as a volunteer firefighter, that you have to run your business and they're needing firefighters.

Jerome: Oh, it tore me up. I've been on the department long enough to hear the inflections in the voices of everyone and nobody's talking and kind of how it's going.

And it didn't take long to realize that this was going to be a mess; that it was already a mess, even just 15 minutes after the call went out. But there I was with customers, and I can't kick them out. When they sounded the whistle for Ashland to go out, I was in the back selling a mattress and frame a couple whose daughter was moving back that Saturday. They were all excited about that.

The tone went off when I was talking to them, and I muttered something like, "Oh boy." The gentleman there that was shopping with his wife said, "Wow, is everybody in Ashland a firefighter?"

I said, "I think we're going to be today."

Sure enough, hearing everybody go out and me not being able to go out and help was pretty rough.

Diane: So did you evacuate when they gave the evacuation?

Jerome: Yes, we did.

Diane: Did you close your store?

Jerome: Yes. In fact, about 2:30 I started shutting stuff down. I was watching a fire on radar because the plume was showing up on radar and listening to it on the radio. The customers I was just talking to, they left. There was another customer, and she left. I snarffed down some food as fast as I could and just kind of started getting ready and to hydrate. It was a particularly warm day and you know it (firefighting) makes you thirsty, anyways, no matter what the weather is. But with as hot and windy as it was, I just started getting ready to start closing down about 2:30, and was actually getting up to go lock the doors when my wife called me and said they were evacuating schools and sending people home. So between that phone call and picking my daughter up, I was there in five minutes.

So the whole process of closing down, you have to take the money out and this and that. Fortunately I had started on that before I got the phone call, and was able to go pick my daughter up from school. She came out and she was bawling. It was so thick and smoky in town already. I got a pretty good view from my front window. And I'd go outside kind of peek at what was coming every once a while and coordinating that with the radar and the radio chatter.

And you know, I had a bad feeling that I had a good idea what was going on. So I took my daughter home, and we have an emergency bugout bag. One of the things that we do is we practice emergencies at home. I've always told my wife that our biggest thing is not tornadoes or floods or anything like that. Our number one problem is out of control grass fire.

It's so tough to plan for, because it can come from anywhere and go any direction. Fortunately, we had somewhat of a plan and a bag ready to go with medicines and deodorant, you know, all the stuff that somebody's going to need for a couple days if you just drop everything and leave. So, I took my daughter home and told her (my wife Jackie) to get that bag ready and get a couple changes of clothes and head to her sister's, or at least Coldwater.

At first I said, "Go to Coldwater, go to Dave's Pizza. Get a spot and see if you can make it to your sister's." While they were getting that stuff ready, I went and filled up both vehicles with gas, which was frustrating in itself, because the weather was so bad the credit card machine wasn't connecting. So, no, there I am with almost no gas in the car. Probably a mistake, but that's how it was. I finally got gas in the car and got back home. I told my wife to take the family and just head east and try to get to her sister's in Halstead.

Diane: So do you know what time she left? Or do you have a good idea?

Jerome: 3:30ish.

Diane: Were they already evacuating Ashland by the time they left?

Jerome: People were already getting out of town. I seem to remember her saying that when she got there, there were already people there at Dave's trying to figure out what they were going to do. That was pretty tough, sending them out and then proceeding to help evacuate the hospital and do what I could around town.

Diane: So what do you do to protect your property, like your store and your home, if the fire came to town? Did you just lock the door and go?

Jerome: Well, yeah, pretty much. There wasn't much I could do about the store, except, you know, shut the doors and lock them. As far as the house goes, it was wintertime so we didn't have any hoses connected or anything like that. You know, the weather was exceptional. At one point in the evening, when there was, not that there was a lull, but when I had a chance, I tried to get a sprinkler going on the side of the yard. It wouldn't have done anything except slow it down for half a second. There's not much I could have done to protect my property. So I just kind of left it to the Will and did what I could to keep it from getting into town.

Diane: So you mentioned helping to evacuate the hospital. Did you help get patients into buses? Or what type of stuff did you do?

Jerome: The first thing I did was go over to the emergency room and help them evacuate. They were loading up a bus with patients. They were going to get a convoy to head south to Buffalo. So I helped get them loaded, and I went over to long term care and made sure that they had everybody evacuated and had everything they needed. I waited for them to start their convoy south. And then from there, I drove around town. I was going back to the store at first. I was driving by the house and the store, and the ambulance was there and the front door was open, so I stopped, went in and made sure that we didn't need any help and everything was going fine.

They said everything was fine and that they were moving on. From there, I just kind of went around town, and whenever I saw people loading up their cars or with cars in the driveway, I pulled up and made sure they didn't have a dead battery or a flat tire or something like that or if they needed some help loading. I was just trying to get people out of town. At that point, it was still a good idea. As it (the day) progressed, I started hearing more chatter that Comanche County was having their problems. It was like, "Oh my Gosh. I just sent my family that way and I'm sending these people that way."

Was that a good call or not? I didn't know at the time. That was pretty rough, emotionally.

Diane: About what time was that, was 4:30 or 5 by then, or was it earlier?

Jerome: It was coming up on 4:00 when I started hearing about Comanche County having their problems. I know it was really hazy. I was hoping that my wife would get past that problem before we started talking about evacuating Protection and shutting down that road. It was close enough. I finally got a phone call from my wife, she was stuck in Coldwater because Pratt was having problems. Pratt is right on the route that she would have taken to get to her sister's. So it was at that point that I knew she was stranded in Coldwater. Bad things were going on. I was...

Diane: Feeling helpless?

Jerome: Yeah. I still kind of wrestle with that decision. It was the right move at the time, but over the next hour the situation fell in a hand basket floating in the water, so to speak, and there I am here and they're stuck there and there's nothing I can do about it, even if I wanted to. The roads were impassable.

Diane: So the fire from the north had already gotten close enough to be causing problems?

Jerome: Yes, it had. At one point, since I wasn't out putting out fire, what I was doing was driving around the perimeter of town. Whenever the wind shifted, and it kept shifting, I would drive into the wind and just kind of scout out to see what was going on. At one point, when we had another wind shift, I went up on Tower Hill. I got about two or three miles north of there and started seeing major

fire sign directly up wind of Ashland, fire tornadoes and stuff like that, leaping over the back end of the cliffs over there.

At that point, I knew we were going to have some trouble.

Diane: So when did you go to the firehouse? Or did you ever?

Jerome: I went to the firehouse when I finished my initial evacuation routes, probably about 4:30 or five, just to kind of check in and see what was going on. I was trying to be at the firehouse when the trucks were coming in, just in case somebody needed to take a breather. So I could make sure people had water, I knew people were thirsty and people were hungry, and I just tried to coordinate us logistically there at the firehouse. You know, when people came in they could stop, get, and go.

Diane: Were there lots of people other than firemen at the firehouse at that time?

Jerome: Yes, there were, and that was a little bit of a concern of mine, including children. For whatever reason, and they had good reasons, but they were there at the firehouse. I kind of put that on my To Do List, just to make sure that they were going to be okay.

One of the things we did at one point was go back to the store and empty the shelves of MRE's, grab a whole bunch of snacks and candy bars and stuff like that. Easy to eat food. I took that back and had that available. At one point, it was sounding pretty bad and as I said, the radio was going, and the kids were starting to get little anxious, as everybody was.

You know, I didn't want panic to kick in. So I went back to the store and got a bunch of coloring books and Crayons and stuff for kids to do and got them set up so the kids could... you know, they are still there and they are still listening, but they had something to kind of focus on rather than listening to the radio.

And as I said the radio was sounding pretty desperate sometimes.

Diane: So when you talk about kids, how many and what ages?

Jerome: There were at least five. The youngest, he was really young and the older ones were maybe 12 or 13.

Diane: So where did you set him up with the coloring books?

Jerome: At our meeting table, where we usually conduct meetings the table throughout. So I kind of put that out there and said, "Hey, I brought this stuff."

I started thinking about it, you know, maybe the adults need something to do too, so the next time I was down at the store I grabbed some playing cards and stuff like that and brought back some more snacks. I was just doing what I could to keep us in the fight.

And then, you know, aid started coming in. I remember Brad and Heather stopping by with a whole bunch of water, which was great, because I was kind of starting to scratch my head about that. So when stuff like that would show up, I would get it in a good spot. So it wasn't in the way, but was still handy. I made sure that as more stuff came in, if it came in, that as more stuff came in, it was arranged in a certain way where nothing was in a path of travel and easy to get to.

Diane: What about food? Did you get lots food started coming in?

Jerome: The first good amount of food I saw come in was early, early Tuesday. Somebody had managed to stop by McDonald's and bring a bunch of breakfast burritos. That was our first real meal. We had snacks and stuff coming in and we were trying to get them to the firefighters as they were coming through and filling up with water getting foam, whatever they needed to do. The kids were running out there and throwing water and Snickers bars and stuff like that to the trucks.

One of the other things I ended up needing to do was making sure that they weren't running out in front of the fire trucks as they were peeling around, because everybody was... We should have been sponsors for Visine, because everybody's eyes were so shot and everybody was tired. Practically nobody had lunch. So I just wanted to make sure kids don't run in front of a truck and we'd have more problems.

Diane: So mainly on Monday till Tuesday morning, you were at the firehouse making sure that everybody had water and something to eat. Kids were out of harm's way and everybody knew what was going on, and you were kind of keeping track of what was happening at that time?

Jerome: Yes, I was trying to set up a headquarters of sorts. You know, I was trying to keep track of the weather as best I could. Whenever the boys would come in for Visine and to take a breather, I tried to give them a weather report. I always kind of ended with, "But this hasn't been right all day long."

So we talked about that fire out of the north and how it was coming down. Of course it was getting smoky as all get out, where we were, since we're on the northwest and the town. All that smoke was blowing right into us. I got firefighter rated particle masks for the kids, as they were kind of starting to cough a little bit and trying to figure out what would be a last ditch stand. If the fire did get into town, we were going to be right on the point of it, and what to do there. I had a city truck available, but it was just me.

Diane: And that's only truck that was in the barn, right? Everybody else was gone?

Jerome: Everybody else was gone but what the city truck does have are air packs, and we have a bunch of spare equipment. The idea was to get everybody in the middle of the barn and cover up as best we could with the spare equipment and put scuba SBA air packs onto the children and just wait it out.

Diane: So when people were coming in on the fire trucks, when they were coming in and refilling with water and getting something to drink, what kind of reports were they giving to you? You said you were giving them like a weather report. What kind of things were they telling you?

Jerome: They said nothing and said everything with just how they were behaving, how they were looking at each other and trying to figure things out. Like I said, I've been around them for a long time and I could just tell from the body language that, they're giving it all they could, but taking quite a bit in return.

Like I said, I'd been on the radio and kind of had an idea of what was going on. The radio traffic was so confused, that there was actually a farmer there with a water tender trying to get that water out to us so he could help out. He asked me where to go, and I said, "I don't know where anyone is right now." Apparently during that time they got overrun and got scattered and were trying to make their way back. And it was after that when I think they're trying to rally at firehouse and get everybody back together so we could get the right amount of force to where it needed to go. And everybody was just really kind of... I don't think they were whipped, at all, but tired, but ready to go

back out. Morale was very, very high. Even though, you know, some of the firefighters had just lost everything. And a lot of other firefighters didn't know if they're going to or not, but they were still on the line and they were still willing to go back out. Like I said, I was there on the bench ready to jump in if anybody wanted out. I asked round, and they just kind of looked at me like, "Are you kidding me?" You know, Visine, water, snickers bars...

Diane: So did you get on a truck on Tuesday?

Jerome: Tuesday, I did.

Diane: Which truck?

Jerome: #52

Diane: And who was with you on that truck? J.D. Redger.

Diane: And where did you go?

Jerome: Well, we had just kind of come back and were trying to figure out where to go and 52 and their crew said, "Okay, we're done. It's time." Which is fine. At this point, and we've been over 24 hours on the line. This is early afternoon on Tuesday, and we were sent out to work on a tree row fire. And during a switch out, J.D. and I kind of got left behind. They were ready to go. We weren't. I had to gather my stuff, we had to get in, and you know, rock paper scissors on who driving or whatever, just trying to figure that out. We pulled out about two minutes after the convoy left, so we were the tail-end Charlie. We were pulling up to the highway, and I'm in the passenger seat and J.D. is driving. Emergency vehicles and people from out of town were coming through and everybody's in a hurry and everything's an emergency. So I just kind of do my usual check left, check right, check left, check right again and I look down east. As we pulled out, J.D. said "Maybe we ought to kind of check some things out to make sure something doesn't start behind us. He was just kind of talking, since we're so far behind and were in 52, which carries hardly any water for what we were dealing with.

It's like, okay, we have to stay with the group or at least check out. We were just talking about this, and I peeked east and I saw a puff of smoke, which was odd. It looked odd. I said, "You know what, J.D., let's just drive east and see what is going on." What had happened is, a fire had started here in town on an abandoned property. We pulled up just as this thing was getting started. It was a minor miracle to even see that little puff of smoke. It had just got started, and it was windy enough that smoke didn't hang around. We said, "We should check this out." We no sooner got that called in and pulled up started putting water on it that trees just started going up.

Diane: So who came to help you with that?

Jerome: We called it in, we called in and said, "Hey, we need everybody!" Ashland came back. We got turned around, came back, and we had some trucks from another department. I didn't get a good look at it. He came up and helped out but we got that fire stopped right as it was coming up on these other occupied houses. And it was rough because you know people came back saying, "Okay, everything's fine.

So now they're scrambling and driving on the road, and you know, we just needed a path so we could get up there and do this... We went through our tank of water, and by the time I got done with that tank Ashland had shown back up and this other help had shone back up. We literally got this fire stopped on the doorsteps of these two houses.

Diane: So when did the strike teams start showing up, the people that came from like Colorado, Nebraska, and Cowley County.

Jerome: The first major help that I saw, like I said, I wasn't out there and apparently the partners are shoring up as they could, but everybody had troubles that day. So basically they would show up, spray water, out of water, go back home. That's what I understand. Like I said, I wasn't there, but it was about 4:00 in the morning on Tuesday. I'd gone out and was keeping an eye on the trash dump because the fire had come there earlier and the way the wind was gone at that moment it would have blown it into Feed and Seed and the airport.

So I went down there as I was keeping an eye on that again. I looked off in the distance and saw flashing emergency lights, which is not unusual at this point in the evening. Then this one flashing light turned into a string of flashing lights, and I believe it was maybe Cheney coming up from the south and they had five vehicles with them, I think is what the count was. They drove by me there at the dump corner, and that's the first major relief that I saw that was going to be there to stay.

Diane: So you went to work on Monday and you were up all night Monday night and you were helping Tuesday. You actually got on the fire truck on Tuesday. So did you go out of town in the country on Tuesday some?

Jerome: Tuesday evening, we responded to a fire west of town, Krier's place. We worked our way up there, and that was the first time I was out of town. I kind of got an idea of the scope of what we'd been dealing with. Unfortunately, we got out there and George's truck broke down. You know, we'd been really hard on our equipment. It's amazing that it lasted so long. While we were out there waiting for a new belt to show up, I got a chance to see what was going on and from his place looked south. It was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. At one point there were these smoke rings blowing horizontally across the horizon. The sun started going down about this point, it was about 8:30.

Diane: Were there things on fire that you could see south of you? Or was it mostly black?

Jerome: The whole skyline was on fire. That night when I saw the relief come through, there was so much fire around town that you could drive without your lights on. And it was point to point on the compass, full circle.

Diane: And this is Tuesday night?

Jerome: This would be a Tuesday morning, when I saw our first relief show up. This Tuesday evening, the entire southern horizon was just nothing but flames. Even from as far away as we were, it was still tall on the horizon. It was a sight.

Diane: What was the wind doing? How fast was it blowing on Tuesday?

Jerome: At this point Tuesday evening, it was back out of the west. Yeah. I think it was only going about 30 miles an hour. I say only 30 miles an hour, because in contrast to what we've been dealing with, 30 was no problem.

Diane: So you mentioned some trucks breaking down. Did you have a lot of trucks break down or was there... Were they easy to fix or did you have to take them off line or how did that work?

Jerome: Some could be fixed. We got them fixed well enough to get back on the line. Some we had

to take off line. The Ox that George was in, was obviously offline until he got the belt put on. Once the belt was back on, it was back online. There were some other trucks which have frame damage. One had to be abandoned. There was another one that got kind of banged up trying to work a berm. It knocked the pump loose. But they got it fixed by Tuesday. Other than that general damage the vehicle, doors being broken and air filters ruined...

Diane: So did you have time to do some maintenance on the trucks?

Jerome: Yes. By Tuesday we are getting some time off the line for vehicles much needed attention to get the attention. By Wednesday we were able to do larger fixes.

Diane: On Tuesday were firefighters getting any attention? Were they able to go get meals or get some sleep.

Jerome: Tuesday around noon, I think maybe a little bit earlier than that, a whole bunch of people showed up and cooked food. That was amazing. We started having sandwiches show up. It got to the point where people brought enough snacks and ham and cheese sandwiches or whatnot, that you could go over and grab a couple of granola bars and a sandwich with ketchup and mayonnaise and mustard. You could get a cold drink and get back at it. I think by Tuesday evening, we were starting to have chow halls open up around town. That response was pretty rapid, considering what was going on and where we were at.

Diane: What about Wednesday?

Jerome: Wednesday. We got on 52 again on Wednesday down to Snake Creek.

Diane: Who was with you on the truck?

Jerome: Delbert. He was driving and I was nozzle. At that point, Ashland, from what I understand, was being used as guides. We would take a task force or two. When you say, "Go to Snake Creek," of course people from out of town say, "What are you talking about?" So okay, we know where we're going. So we'd take them down there. We had another truck out there. We just put out grass fire, knocked it down. At that point, the winds were starting to stabilize, as in they weren't shifting around as awkwardly. The wind was down, so at that point it was just a normal grass fire. That's the first time I really got a chance to get out of town and into the black and started seeing the damage done to the livestock and the fences and houses.

Diane: How did you feel when you saw that?

Jerome: Horrible. I made the comment on the way back into town. I don't think I saw a single good fence out there. It was the wildlife and livestock.

Diane: Did you see a lot of dead that day, or had they started picking them up yet, or were they kind of...

Jerome: Nobody who was in pickup mode yet. I think it was still kind of figuring out what was going on, so it was all still pretty fresh.

Diane: Were you around anywhere where they were shooting cattle?

Jerome: No. No, I didn't see any of that. No, I didn't see as much as a lot of people did. But what I saw was sad.

Diane: So were you out all day? When did you get... When were you relieved of your duties as a firefighter?

Jerome: We were out all day again on Wednesday. We were told to take a break. Of course, you go home, you take a shower. You put the radio on the charger, leave the radio on, and just lie there until you get called out again. So, you're not really sleeping.

I worked Wednesday and came back in again on Thursday. We had enough help on Thursday that we were able to do some stuff around the firehouse and get some bunk time, whatever people needed to do.

You mentioned the store. I had a delivery on Wednesday. Some thousand pounds of potting soil had been ordered a month and a half before, and they decided that was the best day to deliver it. I had a carpet truck show up. He didn't know, didn't care. He was on his route, I know, but there I am, unloading carpet, trying to keep the business going. At this point, my employees are back and they're running the place. Great employees!

I was, "Do I need to come in?" And they said, "No, don't come in, we don't want to see you. If something has to be done, call us, we'll get it done."

Diane: Did you talk to the truck drivers that brought these items in? What were their reactions to what they saw as they were bringing stuff in?

Jerome: Stunned, absolutely stunned. The carpet delivery... the guy driving that truck looked as confused as to why he was there. I wondered why he was there. He was like, "What's going on?"

I explained as best I could at the time, you know, and asked them, "Where's your route take you?" He said, "Oh we're going west." I said, "You be careful going west. There's a lot of damage out there. There's a fence line down. Animals are out. Take your time getting through here and it's like this all the way west not just here. Get on your radio, talk to your truckers, and use your phone, whatever you need to do get the information so you don't crash somewhere.

Diane: So they hadn't heard of this before?

Jerome: No, they came into it blind.

Diane: And this is on Wednesday?

Jerome: Yes. Nobody told them until they got into it

Thursday was kind of a pick-up and maintenance day. It was Thursday evening that we were officially told to get off the line, we're done. It wasn't surprising that we went out again Friday morning.

The wind had shifted again this time the northeast/east. It was howling pretty good. They called us out and we got to the fire station and headed out. There was zero visibility. Back roads. I could see why they called us out, because there are embers all over the place. We got up there and we're trying to find fire. The wind was really howling at this point, 40 or 50. Of course it was just ash and dust at this point.

Diane: What was the temperature?

Jerome: It was kind of chilly at that point. It was getting cold at night. That Monday night/Tuesday morning when they were coming and I'd go and try to put foam into the containers and all that. They were covered in ice. So that's what we were dealing with, hot in the day and cold at night. Of course, that stresses the body out.

This thing (the call-out) on early, early Friday morning, or very, very late Thursday night. We had to. With zero visibility and people from out of town. They would have ended up in ditches or... So. I'm glad they called. We were officially off the line on Thursday but not really until Friday.

Diane: So have you ever had any experiences with wildfires like this before or does your family ever talk about wildfires in their history?

Jerome: No, they never talked about it. I've fought fire like this before, where the wind was blowing that hard with that sort of fire load. In those conditions, with low humidity, hot, especially for the time of year. I've fought in that, but the wind didn't shift around like it did on us that day. If it's blowing 50 to 60 miles an hour, you can get ahead of it. It may be a long ways, but you can get ahead of it and do something to protect the houses, but way the wind was shifting around, you'd think you'd got something stopped and then it shows up somewhere else. It was wicked.

Diane: Is there anything you perceived that was positive that came out of this fire?

Jerome: Unity, a lot of rallying around people who had lost their houses. There are people without fire gear going out there and doing what they could to help their property, their neighbors'. People were driving around cutting fence. I was driving west of town and there were cattle on the road because people were going and cutting fence trying to get these cows out of the way. I think everybody understood the gravity of the situation. Like you said, there's the guy with water tender trying to get into it. All he had was a T-shirt and a pickup truck with a trailer full of water, and he's wanting to go out in it, "Where do I go?"

The food at the firehouse, the burger feed, was amazing. I came back and all of a sudden, here's a grill going! Wow. This is great! People dropping stuff off, doing whatever they could. Not just that initial, but throughout the whole week it was like that.

Diane: So what was your reaction to all the stuff that showed up, the food and like the tables that were there?

Jerome: Humbling. You know, I go off and do something and come back and there's more. I go off do something and come back and there's more. Every time I came back, there was more and more and more. There was never less. You know, the support we got kept us on the line. I don't know if we could have fought that long without rest without knowing that there are people back there who were rooting for us and keeping us going.

Diane: Kept your adrenaline going.

Jerome: It did for a while, and then you just kind of ran out and just kept going.

Diane: Were there some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful?

Jerome: Tell you what, I'd have to give a hat off to the Kansas Highway Patrol and their efforts. I talked to some people who were out around Englewood and they were there shutting down roads and getting rubberneckers and confused people off the roads so they could operate, as best they

could. Those efforts probably did save structures because they were able to get their water tenders where they needed to go.

Now, they had other problems. I understand their main pump went out, so they had to go out of town and get water and bring that back in. Getting those roads shut down, so we could all operate without worrying about a car wreck. I think it is a point that's not really mentioned very much. At one point somebody said kind of half-jokingly, as like you know, if half of these highway patrolmen were firefighter vehicles, we'd have this thing under control.

However you want to take that, but looking back on it, I think that's a testament to how much effort they were putting into it, because there were car wrecks. Driving conditions were awful.

When the trucker got called in, that truck wreck and that over there, I was here in town. And I tried to respond to that, and I got about to the rest area east of town and said, "I can't drive through this.

So them shutting down the roads kept more wrecks from happening, I think, and may have saved some lives.

Diane: What do you think about the communication between the people that were evacuating and the law enforcement or whatever? Because I've heard stories from people that they drove through the fire. Do you have any comment on that, because like you said, you couldn't go, and you've got fire training?

Jerome: Yeah, there's a lot going on, and a lot of it was by necessity. At one point, after one of these wind shifts, I drove west on the dump road because that's where the wind was blowing from. I got about quarter mile west of the dump and heard Vernan Hess on the radio. He was like, "Hey you've got to get down here because the dump's about to catch on fire. I had just drove by there and I didn't see anything because I'm out scouting. I'm looking for that, and I know what I'm looking for.

And just within that quarter mile, it got overran, I had to turn around and I drove back through fire. It's just one of those things where you look out the window and see the side of the road and try to stay on the road as best you can. Maybe turn the music up, so.

Diane: When you were listening to the fire chatter on Monday, did they mention the smoke or the problem with the smoke?

Jerome: I can't think of anything specific. All I know is, when I went to go pick my daughter up, it was so smoky here in town that it might as well have been a London fog. And that was early and it got worse; it got much, much worse and that was just here in town.

Obviously they're up in it. And when I saw them come back in and their eyes were bloodshot. The next run I had was Visine and saline and stuff to clear eyes out. So it must have been just absolutely horrible.

Diane: Have you made preparations or made some plans for what you would do next time to prepare as a family or what you think the community should do?

Jerome: Well, I do know there was little bit confusion in general. Social media was probably tracking that as well. There were a lot of people who were, "What do we do? What do we go? What is the evacuation call? What does that siren (sound like), if there is a siren, what's going on? So there was some confusion there, but I think people kind of worked through it, probably through the

social media. Trying to coordinate, "What do we do, where do we go, what direction?"

Me personally? Yeah, there's some things I'd pack a little bit different. I now have a deck of playing cards in our boogie bag. Like I said, it helped out the firehouse, just something for the kids to do. I'd like to have a set of clothes or two back away for them so I don't have to do that, but they're kids. I'd have to do that every few months.

Diane: What about Iris alerts? Do you think they were helpful or did you hear any of them?

Jerome: I don't remember seeing or hearing any of them. When they were sending out alerts that I would have caught, I was with customers.

I generally don't have my phone and radio going while I'm talking, so let's just say it was an exception. My phone is, I kind of remember getting something, but I'm not sure if it influenced me much at all. Maybe it did for other people who weren't in that situation.

There was one gentleman who stopped by the firehouse about 8:00 or 8:30. He said he laid down for a nap and woke up! He was like, "What happened here?" He couldn't think of anywhere else to go but the firehouse.

Him and I talked for a while.

So it didn't reach everybody, but it must have reached enough people that... I understand there was a pretty good sized crowd in Coldwater.

Diane: What kind of plans could the town make, or the community? Something different. Some way to prepare?

Jerome: Gosh. How do you prepare for that? I'd say a typical firefighter wildland emergency like that threatening town, you have some time to prepare for it. This had been so fast, it was outside even the games I play, I mean a tabletop situation at home. Like if it's coming from this way we need to go this way. But it was going so fast, that that convoy from hospital no sooner got the buffalo than they had to go south to Woodward. I understand that they were even talking about evacuating Woodward. That's a pretty major city with lots of personnel and equipment, you know, and they're talking about evacuating there!

The winds shifted so badly. You know, if it had just come out of the west or just come out of the north, you can work with that, even if it's going fast. But when you keep shifting around like that, you don't know where it's coming from.

I'm not sure how to prepare for something like that again, except to just have your basics and have a general plan.

Diane: So when did you first hear there were two different fires that were coming together? Or how did you learn there were two fires.

Jerome: I learned that it was larger than what I thought it was, when I had gone north on Tower Hill and started to see it coming over the cliffs. Everything I had heard of had been stuff from the west. You know, coming out of Englewood and from that direction, the dump. Everything had been coming out of that way. So when the wind shifted and I drove up north, it was like, well, I'm just kind of doing this because I need something to do. I got up there and started seeing the fire signs, and it was like, you know, we have problems.

I got on radio and called in. I don't know if they heard me or not, because everybody was so busy. That Ashland trucks showed up pretty soon after to try to tackle that, but it was too big.

I didn't hear that was multiple fires until much later. At that point, I didn't care. All I knew was that the fire was around us, all that we could see. It was probably more like Thursday or Friday, where it was like, OK this was a fire that Minneola was trying to deal with. We couldn't get it. Nobody was getting anything that day. We were at the mercy of the wind. That's probably when I first heard that there it was a separate thing that joined up. It ended up making a 20 mile head fire, which is incomprehensible.

Diane: Is there anything you remember that struck you as funny after it was over, or that you heard that somebody did, that made you go, "Oh wow, I didn't know that."

Jerome: Well, we had fireman's humor going throughout this whole thing, it is just one of the things that kind of keeps us going. I did get a chuckle one day, I think this would have been Wednesday afternoon. I think the school was serving dinner that night. They had set up an emergency kitchen and all that.

Some of the firefighters had gone over there. There are still some sandwiches left, and I was too tired to do anything, so I just sat there.

I was sitting there watching this, just peeking out the barn door, and here's this guy sitting by the fire truck. He's just sitting there talking to himself, it looks like. What is this guy doing?

I start peeking around and I see it is a reporter. He's got a camera set up, and he's talking to the camera. You know, there are three or four of us sitting here at the table and here's this guy who drives all the way out here. It's still pretty dangerous out here, even at this time, and he makes it all the way out here from Wichita. He does this report in front of the fire truck and he just packs his stuff up and takes off.

We're right there, and, "Why did you even come out here? What is this guy?" Ten minutes later, he comes back, grabs a sandwich from our dwindling supply and just takes off. He doesn't talk to anyone.

What was that? I'm looking around and "Did anyone else hear that?" We were kind of joking around about that.

I gave Dave a little bit of grief, because he pulled in one day and one little reporter went up there and started interviewing him. We were kind of in the background, chuckling.

Diane: What do you think of the media coverage of the whole incident?

Jerome: I'm not sure if I can give a great opinion on it. Mostly because I was too busy doing things to sit there and watch television and find out how we were doing. It looked to me like they were more concerned about what was going on in Hutchinson, and with good reason, because they were having their problems. They were talking about evacuating Hutchinson and I guess they evacuated the prison. You know, they were having problems. And this maybe kind of cracked me up too, because my wife was watching television and during the interview, this reporter was up in Hutchinson, broadcasting live. She was saying, "Here we are in Hutchinson, with the largest grass fire in Kansas history."

I guess somebody in the background stopped and turned around and said, "No. It's not. The big one's going on in Ashland right now."

They cut feed and came back and said, "I'm sorry, here in Hutchinson is not the largest grass fire in Kansas history. We're receiving ash from this wildfire down in southwest Kansas."

It went back on with her story, but you know stuff like that. The guy coming in and taking one of our sandwiches instead of going over to the chow hall. You know, they just seemed a little disinterested, considering the scope of what we were dealing with.

Diane: Did you get to talk to the strike team firefighters?

Jerome: A few. I got to talk to a few. Great people. I can't imagine riding a fire truck the distance they did and jumping right into the fires like they did. They were amazing. Of course, everybody is kind of a specialist in one thing. You know, you watch the forestry guys tackle an open grass fire on Snake Creek. I was like, "Oh my Gosh, they're holding the hose out the window."

But then you see them get to work on a tree row, and these guys are good! So, I think as people were put into their specialty roles, we really started making some progress. It was fun to watch how other people did it. And everybody was professional and courteous. I think we did pretty good, and considering how remote we are, I think they got here in a pretty decent time, too.

We saw that first relief Tuesday morning, and it wasn't long after that, that I saw a Blackhawk flying over town. So I knew help was coming. I knew it was coming, we just had to hold out. They started showing up and it was such a relief.

Diane: What was some of the strike teams' perspective of the fire? I mean, what was their perception of how you handled it, or what types of things they saw when they got here? Did they talk about that some?

Jerome: Not so much with me. When I talked to people, it's usually just, you know, "Hey how are you doing. Where are you from?" But they're all professionals. Especially the ones coming out of Colorado. This is what they do. I'm sure we looked a little bit loose and cowboy-ish to them. Like I said, the forestry guys saw were holding hoses out the window and went through this whole safety briefing. This is where we're at, if we're in trouble, this is where we go. Very professional, as they should be, because coming into a situation where they don't know the terrain, they don't know the roads. We have to do that. So it was always kind of interesting when we came flying by them in the brush trucks standing on the back just spraying water. I'm sure there's a contrast there. If there's a picture, it would have been funny.

Like I said, at the same time when they got into the trees, they were rocking it. We don't have equipment like that, and they probably looked at us the same way, like, "What are you even doing out here if you don't have this equipment."

So it was interesting to see how all these different departments with their vehicles that they had brought, how they approached putting out this fire. Everybody did it a little bit different. Everybody played up to their strengths, and whatever their weaknesses were, mitigated those risks. Is very well-done job. I was impressed.

Diane: What about the fire training that Ashland Fire has been doing. Did that have any effect on how this fire was fought?

Jerome: Yeah, absolutely. You know, you get tired like that and that's when your training kicks in. If you don't train, if you're not well-rehearsed and you get tired, that's when people make mistakes. They put hoses on wrong, they slip off the truck, they forget to change the air filters. Stuff like that. So training, plus the experience, and there's a lot of experience on this fire department, those two things together covered 90 percent of the effort. All we had to do was stay awake and not do something silly. Yes, training, training, training.

Diane: After the fire was over and everybody had gone home, they brought in people to help the firemen kind of talk about what they had seen or had done. Was that of any help to you?

Jerome: I believe so.

Diane: How did that work?

Jerome: What I really liked about that is that everybody there had a different story. I'm telling my story. People who were right up there in Englewood trying to save houses, they have stories. Everybody had perspective on how they saw the same events.

It was so nice to be able to get everybody together. And kind of share that story, outside of a potential fishing story kind of deal or "I just don't talk about it". There's a lot more people wanted to talk about, it but I don't think we knew how to talk about it. That's something brand new. What happened was so far outside the comfort zone that we didn't know what to do. Like a kid learning how to walk or read. We'd never done this before, so how do you do this? It was kind of nice having people guide us through that and then hear some of the other stories even if I had opportunity to ask, I probably wouldn't ask. I don't want to point out names but there are some people who did some really amazing stuff that I would never have known about if that pow-wow hadn't happened.

Diane: Did it help you deal with the situation better? Did it give you some relief from knowing what had happened? Did it change your perspective on the fire or the people that you fight fire with?

Jerome: Yes and no. I've always respected the people I fight fire with, not only in Ashland, but in Englewood and Minneola. We've fought fire together for a long time. I've always trusted the people I fight fire with. But to hear some of the stuff that they went through while I'm doing my thing was amazing. I would never have known, had we not done that counseling.

Diane: You think the mediators did a good job of making sure everybody got to tell their story.

Jerome: He did as best he could with a bunch of ornery firefighters. Especially coming right off that. You know, we were still trying to deal with that. No, it was good. It's good.

Diane: Do you think different things would come out now after this amount of time, to kind of have some perspective?

Jerome: I think that depends on the individual and how much he felt like talking about it. You know, what's gone down the memory hole and what's been tamped down the memory hole. You know, it's like the Snake Creek thing. I remember seeing all the dead animals. You know, trying to close up some stuff and put it off to the side. It all comes down to the individual and how they're feeling at this point. I'm glad that it did happen and to sort of be on the same page and talking about things.

Diane: What's your biggest takeaway thing from this whole incident?

Jerome: I think the Ag community has to be commended. Less than 24 hours and I saw trucks rolling through town. This is Tuesday, and hay trucks in town! We don't even know if we've won yet or not, and hay is coming in. How they came together was absolutely amazing.

We were receiving so much support that we were putting out calls for help to unload trucks. There were a couple of times I quit doing what I was doing to go help unload trucks just because there was so much help coming in that we were out of manpower. Vehicles are in use, vehicles are breaking down, forklifts and stuff like that. I'd just never seen anything like that before and it was very humbling.

Diane: Did it make you feel differently about the community?

Jerome: Oh absolutely. The gathering there at the high school on Sunday was the most community-oriented thing that I've ever been around in my life. Grievances were put aside, it didn't matter who, but I was helping people that I thought I'd never talk to again. And there were people there who probably never want to talk me again, and we just were side by side just getting it done.

None of that mattered at that point, we were just trying to find out what we had left and how to help the people who lost things and know what to do next. That was always the question, "What can we do next?"

You know, when somebody finished up a job, they didn't go home. It was always, "Okay, now what?" There was always one more thing to do and there was always somebody there doing that, whether it was donations at the fairgrounds or feeding the firefighters that came in.

I heard a lot of stories about how these firefighters have come in. Sometimes you go help somebody out, and you're lucky to get a tent. And you know, here they are with hot food, good food. Some are like, "We don't want to leave! We'll stay here as long as we can, because this is amazing!" I know a lot of them said that they've never seen anything like that before.

And I think that's a testament to the people of Clark County and Ashland.

Diane: What about all the volunteer help that came later, that you know, came to fix fences and stuff like that?

Jerome: Oh, absolutely incredible. In fact, it's still going on. Just the other week there were some volunteers from Pennsylvania. They came into my store and just kind of walk around and see what's going on. I got to meet a lot of people like that, where they just had couple of hours off. Of course it's hot, we have air conditioning and they're looking for something to do. They just come in and walk around. You know, if they felt like talking, we talked to them. If they just wanted some time by themselves. That's fine.

But to see all of that, and it's still going on. No, that was always, you know, "Okay, this is a hot topic. It's going to be gone in two weeks." Two weeks went by, a month went by, and two months went by, and it's still going on here and we're in August now. But July was when I met these nice people from Pennsylvania. It is still going on. This is outside of what I thought would happen. I think it's just incredible, absolutely incredible.

You see so much negative, hear so much negative, that when something like that happens and just it makes you think that all the negative is just a total lie. You know, here's all this help for us out here in the middle of nowhere, and not just us, but Oklahoma and Texas and everybody suffered through

the same. It was absolutely amazing. Somebody told me a story about a hay truck from North Dakota that still had snow packed in between the bales. I mean that's just packing up and going.

It's amazing.

Diane: So do you have any other thoughts about this experience? Anything you'd like to include or things you thought you forgot?

Jerome: Well, it's nice to be able to sleep again.

Diane: But what about your family? Did they come back?

Jerome: They did. I was able to get a little bit of bunk time Tuesday morning. Well, my wife kept calling me and they were having just a horrible experience. They evacuated the cat, our cat was old and sick and cried the whole time. The kids are bawling. My wife's calling me every 30 minutes and saying, "We're coming home, coming home, coming home." It's like, "No you're not, you're not, you are not."

I finally went over by the grain elevator and took a picture towards Coldwater, east, and sent her that picture. "This is what you're going to have to drive through if you come home right now, so don't."

She got that. "Okay, we're coming home just as soon as the Highway Patrol lets us go through." She even tried prodding them. "I've got to go back, my husband is a firefighter and I need to be there to help them out." And it was, "You're not going."

That's something else I commend them for, because at that time they (my family) did not need to be driving back. Even if they could, it's so smoky, it's so dark. It would be like driving through thick fog, except isn't thick fog, it's something that can choke up your engine, and all of a sudden you'd have a real problem.

So I was able to get home, take a shower, and get a little bit of bunk time. She showed up about 30 minutes after I laid down and was just in tears. She'd seen what we were trying to fight against, and it was nothing but black from here to wherever. It was just miles and miles and miles of burned, and they drove through that and she realized, "Oh my God, he was right. What was I even thinking trying to drive through this scale of... We had no idea."

I made this comment during the pow-wow. All they (the kids) know about the fire department is Easter egg hunt and parades, right? You know, they got to see the other side of it, the work side of it.

Maybe I should have spent more time saying goodbye to them when I sent them on the evacuation. I started feeling that when I heard that Protection was in trouble and they were trapped in Coldwater.

I still think that it was the right call, but it was bloody awful.

Diane: So do your kids talk about the fire sometimes?

Jerome: My son, he just knows something crazy happened. My daughter, she's old enough to know. When she came out of school, you know, I was there, she was running towards me and she was just in tears.

She was running towards me, and she was like, "Daddy, Daddy, I don't want you to die. I don't want you to die tonight."

"Honey, just get home. Let's just get stuff packed. Let's get you out this danger area."

"You're a firefighter, you're going to do that and I don't want you to die."

"I have got to go. People need my help. I need you to get out of here because it's dangerous."

I hope she understands that.

Diane: Did she have any friends in her classes that were affected by the fire?

Jerome: Oh, yes. Yes. They (the class) did an interview (with a number of people involved including myself), and there were a number of kids in her class who were directly affected. And everybody has a story. That's a good thing. I wasn't so sure about it at that time. I'm glad they did that, mostly for the kids.

The questions they asked afterward were adult questions. I tried to give the best answer I could without being too adult.

Diane: So anything else you'd like to add?

Jerome: It was so intense. I thought the town was in balance until after Wednesday. There for a couple of weeks or so, you know, I'd walk around my house and wonder, "Where am I? This shouldn't be here."

Jerome: We were probably saved by just the winds dying down and help showing up in a timely manner. I'm not sure how we did it. I know we feel pretty bad about the people who lost their houses. We hadn't lost structures to a grass fire since I've been on the department.

I know that really bothers people. It bothered me. We did what we could with what we had against a very, very upset dragon.

Diane: Do you think if we'd had more help at the beginning, that it would have been any different.

Jerome: No, I don't. Maybe we'd have saved another house or two, but that's about it.

If all the help that we had, had been here in Ashland when this kicked off, if we hadn't been there in ten minutes to put that out, it would have happened anyway. As it turns out, if there was two, three or four fires, depending on who you're talking to, you'd have to stop all four of those simultaneously. Eventually, what happened, it would have taken longer. Maybe if we'd knocked out one of the three fires right off the bat, the other two still would have got us. It still would have been rough, even with all that help.

It was so windy that even if air support was available, I don't think they could have put it online. Then when the wind finally died down enough that you could (have air support), it was dark. I'm not sure how comfortable they are dropping tons of water out the middle of nowhere with no land markers in middle of the night.

I'd guess they probably wouldn't do that.

So then again, you're looking at Tuesday afternoon. No, I was having a discussion (with someone), I guess Oklahoma was all queued up to go and they still had problems. So I don't know. I think it's just one of those deals where there's so much going on in so many different places that it just was going to happen. If it wasn't an electric fence sparking off, it was going to be a glass bottle in a ditch with a hot sun and setting that off. Then you know, it's a hard decision. Say all that equipment was already cued up and that was going on. Do you sent it here, or did you send it to Hutchinson, or do you send it to Dodge (City)? Where are we on that totem pole?

I think it was just a rough day that was going to happen no matter what. I think all the fire departments dealt with that as best we did with what we had, with experience we have, and we didn't lose.

It's hard. I want to say that we won, but it kills us that people lost their houses, lost their livestock.

People had to go around and put their cattle down.

Diane: What kind of comments have you gotten from people that lost their houses or lost their cattle?

Jerome: I can't believe how positive they are. I think a lot of that had to do with the amount of relief that came and how quickly it came. That they knew that they weren't just going to be left out in the breeze. It was like, hey, you know, people want us to recover from this, so we'd better step up.

They're bringing in hay from Michigan, they're bringing in hay from North Dakota, bringing in Hay from Florida.

You know, these people dropped everything on their own dime. They loaded up trucks with their own equipment, their own hay and were headed this way within 24 hours. You know, how can we fail that? And I never once heard anything down or negative from the people who had lost.

I mean, other than like, "This was awful." But there was no, "I give up." I never saw during this whole time period, "I give up." I never saw it. And that's probably the best thing that I can take away from this is, nobody's giving up on this.

Diane: I think you're right. Anything else?

Jerome: Not at the moment, other than I think the Ashland Fire Department rocked it with good help from Englewood and everybody else. It was definitely a team effort.