

Chris Booth

Diana: What is your name?

Chris: My name is Aleta Christine Booth. I go by Chris Booth, most the time.

Diana: Where do you live?

Chris: 422 West 10th Street, Ashland, Kansas.

Diana: And what's your occupation?

Chris: I'm a physical therapist assistant at the Ashland Health Center.

Diana: And how old are you?

Chris: I'm 60 years old.

Diana: When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire hereafter referred to as "the fire" that occurred on March 6.

Chris: About three o'clock, March 6. That afternoon, I was at work and people came to me and said, "We're going to have to evacuate the hospital because of a fire." It really surprised me because I didn't know anything about the fire or that it was even going on. So I had gone home for lunch that day and it was hazy, but I thought it was dirt. We thought the wind was blowing so hard that there was a lot of dirt in the air. I didn't attribute it to smoke or fire. We just thought the dirt was blowing. So about three o'clock they were saying, "There's a possibility we're going to have to evacuate." It really surprised me.

Diana: So what were your thoughts and actions when you first learned that the fire could possibly endanger your property?

Chris: I didn't do anything for my property. I was sent to the senior living side to see what help I could do with the people that lived there. We were standing there talking about the fire when they said, "Yes, we're going to need to evacuate." They were going to need help with moving people from that area.

So that's when I was like, "Okay what can I do to help?" And they asked me to help move some residents to Coldwater. I said, "Okay, I can get my car and do that."

Diana: So how many people did you evacuate?

Chris: One other employee and two of the residents that live at Senior Living.

Diana: Did you have contact with your husband during this time?

Chris: No, I did not. It was later that I called him.

Diana: So where did you evacuated to?

Chris: The Coldwater hospital. We loaded up two residents into my car. I just had enough time to grab my purse and lock my office. Thinking back on it, I should have done more with my records. I

didn't do anything with my PT computer or files. I just locked the door and left. And looking back on it, I wouldn't have done that. But I was in such a surprised panic that, "We've got to get these people out of here," that I didn't even think about that. Glenda and I did what we needed to do. We helped get the residents in my car and we took off for Coldwater.

Diana: What time?

Chris: That would have been about 4.

Diana: So did you run into any smoke or fire on your way to Coldwater?

Chris: Not fire, but there was smoke surrounding us on all sides. It looked like everywhere around us was on fire. There was smoke in the distance, it wasn't close, but there was smoke all around us and that was really scary.

Diana: So what did you do when you got to Coldwater?

Chris: Went directly to the Coldwater Hospital. We went inside and got people to help us, telling them we were from the Ashland facility. They were expecting us and people then came out to help unload the two residents that we had in my car. They helped us unload them and helped us get them inside.

About that time, the Ashland City Roadrunner bus arrived. Cletus Mages was driving that bus. I helped them with getting those people assisted out of the bus and into the Coldwater Hospital.

Diana: Did you have to return to Ashland to get any other patients?

Chris: No, I did not. Once I was there, I stayed there. Then I called my husband, Terry, telling him what was going on and urging him to get out of Ashland. He wasn't too worried about it; he was going to take his time and load things up and do what he wanted to do, and then he would be there. So I was really worried about him.

Diana: So when did he arrive.

Chris: About 6, because I was worried he wasn't going to make it. Luckily, he showed up about 6, but by then it was a lot worse fire. He drove through a lot of smoke. There's fire damage to our car because he went down in the ditch a couple times and back up because he couldn't see the road. It was pretty scary that he was driving through such dark, black smoke that he couldn't see the road.

Diana: Could he see fire?

Chris: Yes, down in the ditch and away from him, several times there was fire that close. That was scary to him.

Diana: How did you spend the evening?

Chris: There at the Coldwater Hospital, there was a group of us; Teddie Sue and Dave Osborn, Cletus Mages, Terry and I, Amy Fulcher and another lady that she'd picked up from Protection. The group spent the night in the little lobby of the Coldwater Hospital watching television and checking on people. I helped a little bit with that patient care but mostly the Coldwater CNA's and Coldwater Hospital employees took care of our patients.

I helped somewhat them but not very much. Terry and I went to supper at a restaurant in Coldwater and then came back to the hospital. I talked with Nancy Zimmerman, the administrator of the Coldwater Hospital, she said we could spend the night in the Coldwater hospital basement. There were cots there, and it would be great if we just stayed there. We agreed! So that's what we ended up doing. We didn't sleep very well.

Diana: So then, Tuesday morning?

Chris: We couldn't go back to Ashland at that time, when we got up it was 6:30 in the morning. They said, "No, the roads weren't open. Nobody can go home yet." So again, we kind of stayed there in the lobby. I checked on patients, if they needed me to help with anything. I helped with giving a resident breakfast and fed them and then I was thinking, "Well, there's not much else I can do." So Terry and I went to breakfast; we went to a restaurant and came back. Then about that time they said the road was open to go home.

I'm thinking that was about 8:00 or 8:30, somewhere in there. That's when they said the roads were open.

Diana: Did you return any patients to the hospital?

Diana: No, they did not want to bring them back at that time. So I checked with everybody and they said I could go on home. So I did.

Diana: Tell me about the drive back.

Chris: It was unrecognizable landscape; everything had changed so much. It looked like a war zone that is my opinion, or just unrecognizable country. Everything was so burned up. It was scary. It was an eerie feeling, I guess, because what we knew for so long was not there. Landmarks were gone.

Diana: Were things still burning?

Chris: Yes, smoldering. I don't know fire burning, but smoldering and smoke.

Diana: When did you run into fire damage on the way home?

Chris: Oh, not too far out of Coldwater, really. I don't remember exactly, a few miles after turning to go toward Ashland then was where it started, and then the whole distance, the whole way.

Diana: What about the highway? Was there a difference in the highway?

Chris: A little bit, not a lot. It didn't really seem to scorch or burn the highway too much, but it was just everywhere on each side of the highway. So many trees, so many fences, everything was burned up.

Diana: Did it take you a long time to get home?

Chris: Oh, not really, not too much different.

Diana: Were you in a caravan of people?

Chris: No, well, Terry had his car and I had mine, so we were both by ourselves. When we got

home, Terry had turned on the sprinklers so everything was ice! That was funny, that our whole lawn was nothing but white because it was ice because he was trying to keep the house from burning up.

Diana: So did you return to work?

Chris: No, I did not. I called the hospital and they didn't want any employees to come in. I think they did bring in some housekeepers and people to start kind of cleaning things. But no, I did not work that day.

Diana: Did you work on Wednesday?

Chris: I did Wednesday morning. They had cleaned up my physical therapy department and I had some patients that really needed to be worked with and seen. So yes, I did work Wednesday.

Diana: Did you do any volunteer work like on Tuesday or were you mostly at home?

Mostly home. I'm wondering if we were going to have to evacuate again because there is still a lot of fires and smoke all around us. I wondered if we came home too early because of how bad it smelled and this fire was still burning.

Diana: How long did the smell last?

Chris: A long time. I don't remember how long.

Diana: Did it change?

Chris: Yes, different days smelled differently; stronger some days than others. I don't know how to describe it, but yes, it smelled bad and we were worried about it.

Diana: Did you lose anything in the fire?

Chris: Not really, just Terry's car was a little bit damaged.

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

Chris: Probably the drive coming home and seeing everything so changed. I was just amazed at the difference and how much damage was done.

Diana: So what most surprised you the most?

Chris: That it happened so fast. That we just didn't have any notice; that all of a sudden it's, "Oh, my gosh, you've got to leave." It happened so fast.

Diana: Who told you about the fire? Was it some person who came to tell you? Or was it an intercom-type thing at the hospital?

Chris: It was Erin Fast. She was the nurse on duty at the hospital and she was the one that told me about it, saying, "We're going to have to have to evacuate. They've called the hospital, we have to evacuate."

Diana: Did you have any physical or financial losses caused by the fire?

Chris: Just a little bit of damage to Terry's car but not enough to worry about.

Diana: Anything in your neighborhood?

Chris: No.

Diana: Do you know where your neighbors went?

Chris: No, I do not.

Diana: Can you perceive that anything positive that came out of the fire?

Chris: The community working together to help each other to recover from the fire. I think it's been a big thing after the fire, everybody wanting to help everybody, trying to help each other get through it. Being positive.

Diana: Are there any good parts for the hospital?

Chris: Again people working together would be positive, making us realize the little things don't matter, that working together to save each other was important.

Diana: So with evacuating patients, was there a plan in place on where to take the patients and how to evacuate people from the hospital?

Chris: We do have plans in place, emergency agreements with other hospitals. That's why Coldwater hospital was contacted. I know the Protection nursing home was contacted, but they themselves didn't know if they could stay there or not and what they were going to have to do. Also Buffalo, Oklahoma, hospital was contacted because not all of our patients went to Coldwater, part of them were split up and went to Buffalo and then in turn they went on down to Woodward.

So mutual agreements with other facilities around was in place, but it was calling ahead to make sure they could take patients before anybody left. We didn't know what direction to go for sure until the phone calls were made. But I know, the agreements were in place ahead of time.

Diana: Do you practice emergency procedures at the hospital often?

Chris: Yes, we do. I know we've had drills of evacuating everybody out of the building, loading people up and moving them. We practiced moving them into the senior center just as if something would happen to our facility and we need to get everybody out. We have practiced that. We do have fire drills regularly and tornado drills too. But there have been a couple times we've evacuated the whole facility in practice.

Diana: In your opinion, how were the patients affected by this.

Chris: Some they were really upset. Luckily, having our CNA's there with them helped them a lot to be reassured. Others it didn't seem to have any effect, they weren't too upset or just kind of took it in stride, having confidence and trust in us to take care of them. But yes, some of them were very upset and scared, as we were too, I think.

Diana: Do you have any history of wildfires in your family.

Chris: No.

Diana: Have you ever experienced a wildfire before?

Chris: No.

Diana: Even a small fire or anything like that?

Chris: No, I have not. My first fire, a dramatic fire!

Diana: Thinking back on it, how did you feel about it all? Besides being scared.

Chris: Just so surprised, I guess. Shocked, that it can happen so fast. Thankful that everything was okay. Thankful that the people were okay, because that could have been so much worse. Thankful Terry was okay.

Diana: What can you do or have you done to prepare for another emergency?

Chris: At the hospital, I think we've thought about it and talked about what we could have done better, what we could do differently. Like I say, getting my computer and records, I would have done that. Now thinking back on it, I should have done that. The rest of the supplies and stuff I wouldn't worry about, getting the files out of my cabinet and the computer should have been taken.

Diana: What about personally?

Chris: At home? Terry grabbed my sewing machine. Heck with the pictures, heck with the computer, but he grabbed my sewing machine. He's a good man!

Diana: He knows what you like.

Chris: He took my sewing machine, but I would have got pictures, I think, or my photo albums because he didn't think about those. And then he grabbed his laptop, but not my computer.

So getting the computer tower, I would have grabbed that or asked him to have got that. I think we've talked about that now. He just kind of grabbed things and he randomly could.

Diana: Because of the time factor right?

Chris: Yes.

Diana: So would you consider like making a list of the things that you would want and where they are?

Chris: We were scatterbrained because when that happens you're just, "Oh, my gosh, I've got to go!" So yes, getting more prepared and getting paperwork together better in a file box would be something I still need to do.

Diana: So what about the community?

Chris: I don't know. I guess I know what we've done in the hospital but I don't know about the community.

Diana: There's nothing that you would suggest to them to do or think they should do?

Chris: I don't know what all they could do differently.

Diana: Is there anything now that, as you think back on it, was kind of surprising or funny about the situation?

Chris: Coming home to the lawn being white because we watered it was really funny!

Chris: Did you have any friends that lost things?

Chris: Yes, people at work like Patti and Rod Young lost everything. I felt so bad for their losses. I had a patient that she lost her home. Mary Cox lost everything. So that really hurts. You feel bad for them.

Diana: Do you have any other thoughts about this experience that kind of stick in your mind?

Chris: Not particularly, no. I just hope it never happens again for all of us.

Diana: What did you think about all the volunteers that came to town to help after the fire or even during the fire?

Chris: Amazing, truly amazing that they would pull together and help us. What a tremendous gift to Ashland, thanks to social media with Facebook. It just amazes me that it reaches so far across the country and that people from all over the United States would come here to help us when they didn't even know Ashland, Kansas existed before this happened. So I thought it was tremendous that they would send hay and send food and send water and all these supplies. The outpouring of love to everybody was tremendous.

Diana: Did you go take advantage of the food that was being prepared at the school or at the camp during the fire or afterwards?

Chris: No, we didn't. I think Terry went and got a case of water! But that was because everybody said, "There is so much; go get a case of water." But other than that, no.

Diana: What was your impression of all the fire trucks that showed up?

Chris: Oh wow, wasn't that amazing? That was great. I'd never seen such a force before. That and seeing the helicopters dropping the water. We did watch them for a while, how they flew around on Tuesday, or was it Wednesday? It was Wednesday that they were flying around dropping water. That was amazing. I had never seen anything like that. I've seen it on TV but not for real. So that was pretty amazing.