

**Diana:** Today is May 1, 2018. What is your name?

**Greg:** My name is Greg Gardiner.

**Diana:** Where do you live?

**Greg:** Ashland, Kansas.

**Diana:** And what is your occupation?

**Greg:** Rancher.

**Diana:** And how old are you?

**Greg:** I'm 59.

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

**Greg:** That day, as I remember, I was at Dodge City getting my pickup worked on and my brother Mark sent me a text. I was in the Ford shop waiting room and he had sent me a text somewhere around 11 or so, and he said, "There's a fire southwest of Englewood. We need to be aware of it." Of course, at this time, the wind was very high already, throughout that day. He said, "We'll just need to monitor it." I didn't think too much of it because it was far away.

I left Dodge, but the interesting thing when I got my pickup out of the service bay and got outside, I could already smell smoke. Well, me thinking this was the fire from the Englewood area, I'm going, "Goodness gracious." But the wind was so high, that I thought, "Well, maybe that's possible." But what I actually found out, there was a fire on the south side of Dodge City and that was the smoke that I was smelling. But that was part of one of 23 fires that were recorded throughout the counties in Kansas on that day.

**Diana:** Did you have any trouble getting out of Dodge.

**Greg:** If I had wanted to go west, they had one of the roads blocked on Highway 50. I was able to take 283 and go south, once I cleared that area where the firemen were trying to put out the fire. As I headed south to Minneola, there was no problem and I was under a crystal blue sky. But as I cleared Minneola, off to the southeast of Minneola, I saw what would later be another fire that would hook up with the Starbuck. But there were huge plumes of smoke in those wind-tower areas. I thought to myself, as I went through, I knew that all the resources that could be moved were moved to the state line and southwest of Englewood. I knew the Ashland forces were out and probably some of Minneola had already been called out. I'm going like, "Boy howdy, that one's already in trouble. I hope they get it stopped!"

**Diana:** Could you see the fire down by Englewood yet? Could you see the smoke of it?

**Greg:** I could not.

**Diana:** So you were mainly seeing that. Could you just see smoke or could you see flames?

**Greg:** I could not see flames.

**Diana:** So it was far enough east?

**Greg:** It was just big, huge, clouds of plumes of smoke. They were rising larger or higher up in the sky than regular. And they were higher than the wind towers. That being said, I still couldn't see what was in front of me for a few more miles.

**Diana:** So were you in contact with Mark or Grant or anyone?

**Diana:** Actually, Grant was at his house and was doing some work in the basement. I had called him or texted him, and he was unaware even more so than me, but his first response back to me was, "Oh, my goodness, it's starting to get eerie down here. It's very dark and things are happening very fast." And as I came through the Big Basin, I could see that things were about to change very rapidly and the sky was changing.

**Diana:** So about what time?

**Greg:** At this time, it would have been, if I recollect right, 1:30 or a quarter to 2:00. As I turned off, the road was already blocked 283 going south. They had the highway patrol at the Englewood Junction. So I went on east toward Ashland and there's a little County Road 10 that I can catch a dirt road on the back way. Yet I was seeing something that you'd never seen before and you knew you were fixing to go into something that you hadn't experienced. I didn't know what, but you had crystal clear sky on one side and you were going into just utterly black. When I got to the house, they were already starting to send policemen and people out. They were saying we were under a voluntary evacuation and the mandatory was yet to come.

**Diana:** So did your family evacuate? Did Debbie leave?

**Greg:** They hadn't yet. First off, I knew that running was not... You couldn't outrun this. And I knew that the safest place to be was in our nearby wheat fields. I had told her to pack some things up and we did. And then the part of my odyssey of this deal, things start to happen very rapidly.

Mark called in and he had been in contact with the fire for a much longer period of time. He and Harry Walker had seen it down southwest of Englewood and their reasoning was, "We need to let professionals do this and get out of the way." So Mark and his wife Eva had come back to their house and Mary Cox had called them. She said, "Oh, Eva, my house is on fire."

Fortunately, Mary wasn't there, but Mark and Eva said, "Well Mary, we were just there 10 or 15 minutes ago. You're okay." "No, please go check on it; my house is on fire." And they left and headed back towards Englewood. They hadn't gone very far and they could see the flames. And they said, "We've got to go back." So he had called me and we were going to meet. He had three horses left at his house. Fortunately, a lot of our riding horses had been used that day and were at a different location, so they were able to evacuate safely. He said, "Well, meet me at my house and we'll get those three horses." Then things started to really happen fast.

**Diana:** So where is your house from Mark's house?

**Greg:** I'm a mile north, but I have wheat fields between us.

**Diana:** He's surrounded by pasture?

**Greg:** The pasture runs up right beside him next to me.

**Diana:** And how far is he from the event center?

**Greg:** Less than half a mile.

**Diana:** And where is he from the old brick house that Strangs used to live in?

**Greg:** The same half mile, but the corridor to get back up into the Strang brick house. There were tree belts all the way up that corridor that the fire could follow and did.

**Diana:** So when they got home, how much time did they have to get those horses?

**Greg:** Well, the thing is, there was a trailer at our AI center, which is less than a quarter of a mile from there and we're charging into the blackness of night. I mean the sun had disappeared. He's in front of me, and I stop and get the pickup and trailer. I can't see flames, but I can start to see the orange glow of the approaching fire and I'm going like, "Oh gosh."

I roll into his housing complex and immediately we meet the fire at the back door. I look at this situation and I'm going, there's no way that we have time to back up a trailer to a barn and load horses. I mean, it's over with. We're already too late. We were too late when he said, "Come help me." When I pulled in there, Mark and Eva were standing in their yard trying to make a plan.

**Diana:** Could you see them?

**Greg:** I could see them. They were 20 yards away from me when I pulled in there and then they disappeared behind a wall of smoke.

**Diana:** And it's black smoke not gray?

**Greg:** It's black smoke. If you had put a bandana around your head or a gunny sack, take for instance, if you'd closed your eyes, that's what it looked like. That was the experience. I thought I could feel the intensity and the heat, and the fire was still maybe 100 yards away, but I could feel it. I could see little firefly embers out the windshield.

**Diana:** Are you still in the pickup?

**Greg:** I never got out of the pickup, but instantly, as I drove in there and they disappeared from sight, I had a crashing feeling of self-preservation, "I've got to get out of here." But at the same time, I have a crashing feeling on the other side of shame and guilt.

**Diana:** Did you know where to go if you were to leave? I mean, could you see the road?

**Greg:** My compass was still working, you couldn't see to drive. To get in there, Mark's front driveway is pipe and steel. So there's only one road in and I have a 30-foot trailer and one-ton dually pickup. In the aftermath, thinking of what would happen if that pickup was still there, neither one of them would get out. So if I don't move at that time, we all die. But the two feelings hitting me as I'm leaving, I'm being chastised on one side of my emotions for being a coward and leaving my family to die. On the other side, I'm trying to save myself and live.

So I get out, and as I leave, there's a tree belt that cordons off beside our feed pens and gets out into the area of where the firemen were. By this time, there already were some firemen there. I could not

see anything, but I could hear the tree belt exploding in fire beside me as I drove by.

**Diana:** Is it a cedar tree belt?

**Greg:** It is a cedar tree belt and I could still hear that thunder of explosion beside me. Then I got to the courtyard, which is a large open area in front of one of our barns. I didn't know who he was at the time, but it was Tyler Woolfolk, I found that out later on. We were side-by-side, face to face, and could barely hear each other over the roar of wind and everything else. He said, wistfully and hopefully, "You are the last one out of there?" And I said, "No, Mark and Eva are still down there."

There was a picture taken by my brother Garth that I saw several weeks later, it was Tyler who had the commented, "I've never seen anything in my life so scary." And at the time, this was all under God's plan, because if we had seen that we would have been paralyzed, if we'd seen a 60, 80, or a 100-foot wall of flames. But because we were completely blind and we moved on faith, we got out. But Tyler and them couldn't go down in there. Eva came shortly out after me, behind me. The interesting thing about this is, when you see this in the aftermath, if Mark had tried to come out the same way that Eva and I got out, he would have never made it.

It would have been another death trap because the cattle in this side of the pen had panicked and popped open the gate when that tree belt was on fire. In many instances, a lot of the ranchers and we had seen this happen, the cattle were almost like they were thinking they were defending themselves, but they ran into the fire. So there were 15 to 16 dead carcasses and a solid cement bunk on one side and a tree belt on the other. If Mark had chosen to drive out that way, he would have been in a death trap there. But he, inside of his house, was able to see enough outside there that he saw Eva's pickup was gone and he knew it was time for him to get out. He also knew that the horse barn was starting on fire. So as the fire blew by, he went into it, but to get to his pickup he had to run through the yard on fire.

He got in his pickup and when he circled around, he did not go through that corridor. He went back, went through the fire, and went on the back side of it to get to the horse barn. Well, it probably was a shorter time than I told all the publications and interviews. Later, I estimated that it was a half hour; I don't think it was that long now in retrospect. Sometime shortly thereafter, Eva and I were together out in the wheat field. We found each other, but neither one of us knew where Mark was. Tyler was the man that came along, took off his facemask and his oxygen tank and said, "We've got confirmation that he's alive."

**Diana:** So he was on a fire truck?

**Greg:** Tyler? He was. Then, in the aftermath, we got to the horse barn.

**Diana:** Once that fire went through and it quit being dark, and you could see each other and stuff, you could tell what was going on, right? Was it still light?

**Greg:** On that side of the world, the fuel had been used up. I mean the haystacks and hay were on fire. Once we met Mark, their house was on fire. I mean, we stood together and watched it burn. We got the fire stopped and saved the horse barn, but as a family, Mark and Eva and Ransom and I, we watched his house burn to the ground.

**Diana:** There wasn't any other alternative, was there?

**Greg:** No. The interesting part of the story, I mean, that morning whenever Starbuck's first flame was lit, history was written for all of us. I mean there was nobody that could have saved... What was

going to burn was going to burn. In the aftermath, there were firemen that were heart-wrenched that they'd lost. I mean, they came as hard as they could from Englewood to try to help Mark's house, because they knew that was the corridor it was going to and what was in front of it. They said when it hit, it was running 80 to 100 mile an hour. In an instant, there was no human way to save it. None of us blame any of them. It just happened.

**Diana:** Yes. Did it take a long time for their house to burn down or was it like five or ten minutes and it was gone?

**Greg:** Well, in a short time period the roof was collapsing. But it was still on fire the next day, smoldering and flames and some of the wood area. But you know a lot of people asked in the aftermath if you'd had a tile roof and stucco walls, would that have made any difference? I said that's exactly what Mark's house was, a tile roof and stucco walls. It cooked it.

**Diana:** So what about your family while this was going on? Did they know where you were?

**Greg:** They did not know and it's good that they didn't.

**Diana:** Did they leave? Were they still at the house?

**Greg:** When they got the mandatory evacuation, Debbie called me and said, "Where do I go?" I said, "You can't outrun it. You're going to die if you try to run." I said, "Come down to the wheat field and get on the wheat field." So she and my daughter Sierra were in the vehicle and they rode it out there. Interestingly enough, in God's plan, our house was saved. For many days afterward, a lot of our interns and helpers and Mark's family... The next morning was the only time for a couple hours that we lost electricity. I don't know why. We must have been routed to a different way because a lot of poles were down between Englewood and Ashland, but we had power.

She was cooking meals throughout that night. People could come get a shower at our place. For many of us, it was many days before we could ever get the smell out of our nose and out of our clothes; it was with us for a long time.

**Diana:** So when you're standing down there watching the fire and you know the house is gone. You saw those dead cattle there probably in that lane.

**Greg:** There were some of them there.

**Diana:** So did you start making a plan of what you were doing next?

**Greg:** That night was mostly just reaction. For us, it was the short time period of shock. The good thing is darkness. As the night evolved, the fire was accentuated in the darkness because every tree belt and tree and house that had burned was still on fire. You just couldn't comprehend in your mind that the whole world was on fire. In every direction, there was no horizon without fire out there.

**Diana:** And it was high fire, right?

**Greg:** Yes, as far as the eye could see. For 48 hours, Tuesday morning was round two as the wind switched and burned what it hadn't burned the day before. But it was clear into Wednesday morning before we got up and looked out and did not see fire.

**Diana:** Monday, after the fire and the wind went through, was it still awfully windy?

**Greg:** Oh yeah, it continued. As everything had been predicted for that day to be a red flag warning day, the high winds from the south/southwest had come through. They talked about equally high winds coming back from the north. When the front came out of the north and brought the fire, the Starbuck fire met up with the Minneola fire and then those two fires turned back and dropped their vengeance towards Ashland again. It remained windy most of the night, the temperature dropped.

**Diana:** Do you remember when the temperature dropped? Was it something where you go, "Oh, it's cold now!"

**Greg:** It was eight or nine o'clock, but as we had tried to figure out and moved around the perimeters of the ranch, we'd gone over to the Dunne Ranch and Mark and Eva had gone over there. If they hadn't, this would have been another sad part of the story. The wind had switched and dropped the fire into the tree belt, and it was working its way back to all the Dunne Ranch houses. So one of the garages was on fire. They didn't have electricity, had no way to pump any water, but they were throwing dirt on it.

This was close to midnight, and for lack of not knowing who to call, Mark calls me. He goes, "If you can get some fire trucks in here. I think we can save this." I'm joking inside of my mind; I'm going like, "Do I look like a fireman? I'm not on the fire department." So I call the only fireman I know, Scott Tune, and he answered, on top of this. I said, "I don't know where you are; I don't know what your circumstances are, but if you can break anything loose to come to the Dunne complexes. It's about to go up in flames. If we can get there, we can stop it." They broke two tankers loose and when they got down there, it was about to burn up an over-100-year-old barn and all the other houses there.

**Diana:** Did you find out where he was?

**Greg:** I don't know where they came from, but they were close enough. They weren't very far away when they broke off. So they got that put out. I'm coming back around to your temperature change, a lot of these stories take a long way to go around the circle. But we had another friend that was having a meeting at Woodward, Oklahoma. He had ordered a lot of steaks for the meeting. Well, because of the fires in that region in Oklahoma, it wasn't very well attended. And so when they came out and started listening to the radio after the meeting, and the people in charge of it all said, "You bought all this meat; you might as well take the ribeye steaks and the food with you." And he's going, "What am I going to do with the food?" Well, he found out what was going on and he knew what was hitting us.

So he comes up and at 1:00 in the morning, he's at the Dunne Ranch facility and he has all this meat. The temperature's dropped, and he makes contact with Mark and Eva. He goes, "Is there anything I can do?" Mark said, "Well, if you had a coat. I need a coat." That's how cold it had dropped.

The other part of this circular story, the firemen that he fed there stopped to eat, and while they were there, the fire rekindled. In that time period of everything that happened, they would have normally rolled in there, stopped when they thought they had it contained, and then they would go off to try and do something else. If they hadn't stopped to eat those steaks and been there when it fired up again, the first stoppage would have been all for naught. All those buildings would have burned. But there they were.

**Diana:** Was that the first meal that they had had all day?

**Greg:** More than likely.

**Diana:** Because they left at noon, I think. Do you know how many firefighters were there? How many trucks?

**Greg:** Well, it was those two tankers...

**Diana:** Maybe a brush truck?

**Greg:** There may have been three total.

**Diana:** Right, and I don't know how many guys are on there to man that, but maybe there were five, six, seven, eight guys. But they got some good steaks that night!

**Diana:** To be in the right place. So did you lose anything in the fire?

**Greg:** We lost a lot, but we didn't lose what was important.

**Diana:** When you talk about loss, you're talking about the Gardiner Angus Ranch as a whole?

**Greg:** As a whole. In our up-front losses, we lost Mark's house and a few of his outbuildings there. We lost a tractor there and we lost a Ranger four-wheel-drive, all-terrain vehicle that we used for calving. One of the guys left it in the pasture; he was going to use it the next morning! There was a frame left.

But the biggest asset that we lost was 600 cows that burned up in the fire. I say, "burned up." The fire caused their demise. Now there were quite a few of them that lived but had to be destroyed afterward. The double hit on that was that all of them were bred and so they were either calving or going to calve the next fall. And interestingly enough, of course, we didn't know at the time, until daylight, we lost over 270 miles of fence that was totally destroyed and either had to be totally replaced or repaired to put back. So basically, we, as a ranch, lost all of our infrastructure.

**Diana:** Right. So did you have any fenced places where you could put the cattle that survived?

**Greg:** Well, we did a little bit. Those would have been wheat pasture areas, or if those wheat pastures were right next to a burned grass pasture, those fences were easier repaired quickly and we could put cattle on the wheat pasture. But the flip side of it is, in its total destruction and devastation, there wasn't much to bring to those wheat fields. If they were on there, they lived. If they weren't...

**Diana:** So you didn't have to gather cattle from other places, they were pretty much gone.

**Greg:** Not a large amount.

**Diana:** Since there were lots of cattle that had sufficient burns or other things that happened during the fire, did you have help in putting them down?

**Greg:** Yes, that was one of the great blessings of all that. As we talk about it and you look back on it, this event drove home to me how we still live on the frontier. Many times people recall throughout the two days that they called for help and there was no one to come. In your secluded mindset, you're hoping this is just happening to us. We didn't really know the size and the scope of what the community and the county was dealing with. But as pieces of information started to gather, one of the great helps that I had was Larry Konrade. On Tuesday, he made it down to our place, and

he had been helping to destroy cattle north of town with Giles and Bouzidens. Larry leases the Dunne Ranch for hunting rights, so he knows it very intimately. We hadn't even got over there yet, but we knew that there were a vast amount of cows out there. But you still hope against hope that they're okay, that they're not damaged beyond saving. But as we made our plan, Larry said, "What can I do?" And I said, "Well, if what I'm hearing is true, I need you to go over to that ranch and start putting down cows. I'll start on this side." He goes, "Well, how do I know?" I said, "Larry, you'll know." And he knew.

**Diana:** So what about wildlife, too? Was there a lot of that?

**Greg:** Interestingly, on Tuesday morning, I was standing on Angle Road by Big Sand Creek and just observing the world. I saw a deer walk by and what was left of some hanging wire. This deer just walked right into the end of the wire and it kind of spooked him that something touched him. I still didn't quite understand, but then he shot off across what was left of the road and hit the other side of what was left of that fence. But that deer was burned blind in his eyes.

When we got to the ranch and went along the Cimarron River on Wednesday, Larry had been down there and he had a clue of what was there to be seen. We walked down there and started putting down cows that needed to be put down. There were three men. One reporter, Mike Pearce, from *The Wichita Eagle* was with me, and my good friend Philip Messer had come down to be a part of it and help us.

Philip said, "Stop and listen." We did. I had a multitude of things on my mind; I'm going like, "What?" It was just deathly quiet. There were no birds; there were no crickets. It was just utterly silent. So in answer to your question, as we walked through there, you would see everything from dead deer, burned up coyotes, rabbits, squirrels, everything that lives in southwest Kansas was consumed in that fire.

**Diana:** They didn't have anywhere to go.

**Greg:** When the coyotes and the deer can't outrun it, a big old bred cow isn't going to be outrunning it.

**Diana:** So when did people, besides that guy with the steaks, when did people start showing up to help?

**Greg:** We had calls that were people wanting to come on Tuesday. If they had come, they would run through a firewall north of Jim Cox's residence. In that area, there were three-quarters of CRP that hadn't burned the night before. When the wind switched, the smoldering embers of the cottonwoods that were burned up, it started all that on. That fire actually headed towards Phil and Maryann Cunningham's house. Preston Cunningham had farmed a firebreak around their house the night before, and that probably saved their house. They are one of the people that had called and whoever answered the call said, "There's no one to send."

So they fought it off themselves as best they could. But their preparation the night before had saved it. One of the more touching things that I experienced, throughout the night on Monday night, I actually got to see Ashland. A lot of people, through Hollywood, don't understand history very well. But the history of the Alamo, the Alamo attack actually started before daybreak and was in the dark. Some movies have tried to do it justice in recent history, with the flares and the fires that went up. But as I looked down into the little valley of Ashland that night on Monday night, I said a prayer, but it looked like the Alamo. It was just ringed. I thought, "I may never see my hometown again."



**Diana:** When it came time to bury cattle, did you have somebody come out or did you do that yourself?

**Greg:** Some of both.

**Diana:** Did the game wardens come and help? Did you have a vet on site?

**Greg:** There were time periods where they asked or they said, "Well, you're going to have to do all these regulations." One of the things that was good, Mark was in the vehicle with Sam Brownback, Governor Brownback, when he came. The governor said, "Do what you have to do."

In the aftermath, one of my comments was, "You know the white men came to this country and shot ten million buffalo. They didn't bury any of them and the world kept turning."

Where we can get to the cattle and had solid enough ground to dig underneath and we could bury them. We did. We had several mass graves throughout the ranch, but there were other large kill zones that you couldn't get to and dig because of the water tables. You'd hit water, or sand, you'd tear up more stuff than you could. So we let nature clean it up. I don't think I finished answering your question, on Wednesday morning throughout the night and the travels of Monday and Tuesday, I knew I had soft tires on my pickup and there were nails. So I needed to get to the feed store and get tires fixed and go see what the rest of it was going to be like. The first thing that I meet coming off the highway is a semi-load of hay. So the cavalry is on the way Wednesday morning. That's how quick it was, well the calls that we got Tuesday, I said, "Don't come. You can't get in here." But Wednesday, they came and they kept coming and kept coming.

**Diana:** So did you have any volunteers out at your house?

**Greg:** We did. This whole thing was a learning experience like no other. How to coordinate a large group of people that want to help you, when you don't even know what to do or what needs to be done at first. But we had a large number of volunteers, from high school kids, from Kansas State University. It was spring break and they showed up. Throughout the rest of the time period, we had different Mennonite relief help come in. But the biggest thing and the greatest help that we had, were people that cleared fencing. Going back to one of your other questions, one of the things that we needed to be cognizant of was that we needed to take pictures of the burnt-out fence to document the fences were destroyed. We did that without an extra veterinary on site. We documented dead cattle in our inventory numbers and we worked with Randall Spare, the veterinary, but we didn't have a specific veterinarian running with us to document the cattle and the cattle that we put down or that they needed put down. We did that all by ourselves, but the people that came in with the excavator; they dug some holes. We had a front end loader and for our neighbor Vince Eisenbart, who lost basically his whole herd. We found that herd next to one of our pastures and we buried those for him with our unit.

But the volunteers, this is another thing. When you have a fence that is completely destroyed and you want to replace it, you need to know the right of way; you need to know your starting point or leave some marker. We're like, leave some posts if there are some stubs or something or a T-post. Don't pull everything because we need to know where to shoot our new line for our new fences. But yes, we had a lot of volunteers show up.

**Diana:** So the kids that came out from K-State. Were some of them pre-vet students?

**Greg:** They were different agriculture clubs, like Block and Bridle.

**Diana:** So for how long did you have volunteers? Were they here for weeks or months? Do you still have volunteers stop by?

**Greg:** Oh, we have from that time period. I have truck drivers that have called back to check on us. "I was thinking about you? How are you getting along? How far are you, have you recovered?" I would say for us, the first two weeks was intense. Then we had help off and on for a couple of months. But once those fences were somewhat cleaned up and picked up, there's no playbook for this and there's no way of knowing what to do and how to do what you need to do. One of the good things that happened for us was, the fire was on March 6. April 1, we had a production sale. Once we got what we had to salvage, salvaged, and put up a little fence, our focus switched on trying to go forward and have that production sale.

That was a good thing because it gave us time to take a breath and see what we actually really wanted to do and how we'd go about putting the infrastructure, the fences, back. So after we had that time period to think a little bit, one of the things that we did, and this is a continuing blessing... People say, "Well, how can that be a blessing?" But the Anderson Creek fire the summer before, a lot of those fence crews who had dealt over there, those professionals moved to Clark County. Several of them approached us and we hired four full-time professional fence crews to go to work for us. Once the volunteers had cleaned up the mess, they could come in there and shoot their lines.

We broke down the government interpretations of what we were supposed to do to try to be able to get a little cost sharing. Those were some other things and hurdles that we needed to jump and hoops to go through but once we understood the kind of materials that we were supposed to use and go back and meet compliance. That gap that I talk about from just getting out there and doing something, we've got to do something! We let that subside so we could make a solid plan. As we went through it, we understood that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to re-organize the parameters of pastures that we didn't like the way they were. Why did they put that fence through that sand dune? Let's go out around the flat of a sand dune. So we changed the boundaries and perimeters of fences, which was a good thing. And so in the aftermath, you know it took us nine months, but we've never been in better shape infrastructure-wise in the history of the ranch.

**Diana:** So you have all the fences done?

**Greg:** We're completely rebuilt.

**Diana:** Are Mark and Eva going to rebuild the house?

**Greg:** Today, May 1st, they were talking with contractors and the people that have been building several community houses here, Bouzidens and Giles. Now Mark's on their list. The good thing about Mark and his situation, with our new facility that we built, we had apartments. So they've been living in our sale barn for the last year. But it is a pretty nice sale barn.

**Diana:** So what about Debbie, did she do a lot of cooking for the volunteers?

**Greg:** She did. Well, The interesting thing about the volunteers is everything keeps happening and you don't understand why. In the middle of the next week, we had a man call from Lubbock, Texas. He was a chuckwagon cook. He felt compelled and he wanted to come feed people. I said, "Well, leave your chuckwagon and your Dutch ovens at home because we don't have any firewood up here."

And I said, "You can cook out of our kitchen there at the sale barn." I'm going like, "What am I going to do? Who are the people I'm going to feed?" God had it all planned out and as the

volunteers came, somebody needed to feed them.

This man had another helper with him and they would cook three meals a day. In that week's time period, they fixed over 600 meals. Those are meals that I didn't know were needed to be fixed! But the chuckwagon cook took care of them.

**Diana:** So where did he get his food from?

**Greg:** Well, there is another God thing. When he started going around Lubbock or started to put together some orders that he thought he would need, people found out that he was coming to the Starbuck Fire zone. People just started giving donations. He called me the day before he was going to leave and he said, "Do you have any extra freezer space?" I said, "No, but I can fix that." He goes, "I'm going to have a lot of frozen food that is being accrued as we go forward, but I need some place to store it. I'll put it on ice to get there." Well, I called Ferguson's, "I need your biggest chest freezer." We got it down here and plugged in on Saturday morning and cooled down and Monday we loaded it and pushed the lid down.

People in Lubbock and down there found out what he was doing and they'd give him so much bacon or go get so many potatoes. He had thousands of bottles of water, cases of water, and I said, "Let's bring the food and leave some water down there in Texas for your next feed or your next fire."

But with the bottles and cases of water that were left during this time period, whether it was the hay trucks coming in or just people, we literally could put the next fire out just pouring bottled water on it.

**Diana:** Did you ever come into town and go to the camp where they were cooking?

**Greg:** I did not.

**Diana:** Did you go to high school any time?

**Greg:** I came in on the... We'd gone through that first week...

**Diana:** Did you come in for the dinner that Sunday?

**Greg:** I came in on Easter Sunday and I went to church. Senator Moran was there, and then they told about all the supplies, "If you need anything, please come to the high school." I was out of toothpaste and I went to the high school and I said, "Well, I'll go get some toothpaste." I was overwhelmed when I stepped into the hall. I couldn't believe it. I found the toothpaste! The meat truck that they were unloading frozen meat from was stopped there and I got some boxes of food there to take home. But that was the only time I came to town during that. It was the Sunday; it was almost six days later.

The fire was on Monday the 6th and the following Sunday that year was Easter and I came to church services. Later on, when donations had come in with different truck drivers, they moved it to either the 4-H building or the vet shop in their extra storage unit. I would take extra clothing or supplies or whatever that needed to go there.

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

**Greg:** Oh, probably Mark and Eva disappearing in a cloud of smoke. And then after that, in the

aftermath of the interviews that I did. A lot of people said, "How could you do what you did in the aftermath?" Between Larry Konrade and his crew and all of us out there doing it, we probably had to put down 135 cows. That shocks the outside world, that you just walk up there and do that. But you talk about needing to be done in mercy. Seeing that, you know I never was in the service, but literally, we saw the horrors of war. When you see a living animal standing there burned, they can't see, their eyes are burned out, their udders burned off, and I don't know how they're standing. They're just nothing but buckskin leather standing there and their mouths are open and panting a little bit. Some of them would be standing next to the bloated, cooked, dead ones that did die, and you know, they're just, "Please kill me."

But in the aftermath of all that, people would ask that, and because of Mark and Eva and everybody living through it, I did all that with a joyful heart. When Philip Messer came down on Wednesday, he goes, "How are you doing?" I said, "I'm not very good at all."

He said, "Well, what?" And I told him about my emotional struggle, standing there running away from my family and yet I've got to live and save myself. And he goes, "Well, you don't understand. God told you to move and when God told you to move, you didn't argue with Him. You listened to Him and you moved." I said, "There wasn't any time to argue." But in my mind, God sent Philip for me to hear in human words His message to me. When Philip told me that, you talk about a weight just being lifted off my shoulders. So in the aftermath, that's why I come back and say, "I did whatever we did with a joyful heart because we were alive." Those were just chores that we had to do every day. I mean, if we had to destroy these cows or we had to fix this fence or whatever, I was alive and my family was alive.

**Diana:** Who were some of the people or agencies that proved the most helpful? Obviously, Philip.

**Greg:** I'll never forget Philip and Larry Konrade. You know, as we've all gone through this, everybody's had to deal with it in their own way. It's a private deal, somewhat. I mean, we deal with our emotions every day but differently. Then in the aftermath of it all, there are people in our community that got post-traumatic stress syndrome and are still trying to cope with it. I had a gift from God that he took all of my emotion away from it on that side of it.

You know the closeness of the community, I mean like the veterinary center. One of the things that was great, you get so isolated and so consumed with what you're dealing with the aftermath. I was doing chores that morning and getting ready to go out again. And Melanie Hink and Jan Endicott were going around the community handing out hot breakfast burritos and hugs. At that moment, it was pretty...

**Diana:** It's one of the best things. So what do you think, what effect, physical, financial, or emotional, which ones had the biggest toll on you or the community? Do you think there's a little bit of everything?

**Greg:** Yes, obviously it's an emotional deal. The emotion takes over everything; it's all-consuming, from the bad portions of it to the joyful portions and the ability to see the goodness of mankind. The people in the agriculture world that came to our rescue, that's just beyond belief to this day. When you see trucks lined up for a mile and a half, and you know they've driven 24 hours and they're lining up for another hour and a half for you to get them unloaded at nighttime or midnight. You know they want to help you. But the thing I find interesting as a community, and it's been said many times by a lot of the leaders, you never heard anybody say, "I'm going to quit." There was never anybody said, "I'm not going to rebuild," and use it as a chance to get out.

I'm proud of the community for all the interviews. I've had multiple people say, "Man, your

community was so impressive with the interviews and the television." I'm proud of their education and being able to speak to the public and tell our story.

**Diana:** Nobody complained.

**Greg:** No, it's not a story of what happened to us because, in production agriculture, we understand that these things happen. Now, does it happen to the scope of what this was? We'll never understand that, but there will be more fires, there'll be more tornadoes, there'll be more disasters, droughts, hail, snow, blizzards... But those are the risks that come with what we do, trying to feed the people of the world.

The financial side of it, the fact that we're back and our infrastructure is built and our inventories of cattle have been replaced. Fences are back. That's by the goodness of people that poured in money to KLA and checks were cut to our community from them and from the Working Cowboy Ranch Association, the Ashland Community Foundation... You know, by midsummer, I didn't know whether we could keep going or not, and then we got a large check from KLA, and I'm going like, "Maybe we can keep doing this." And then the Ashland Foundation...

So when the banks were able to... Obviously, as much as anybody, they're hooked to the agriculture. A lot of their assets got burned and destroyed in this and loans on cattle that weren't going to be replaced. But when they gave low-interest loans for us to keep operating the lines of credit and keep everybody going, that was hats off to them. So yes, the financial part of healing is going to take the most time; we've all been shocked that we've rebuilt very quickly. But you know, all of us that rebuilt have got extra zeroes on our debt line. It's going to take some time for that to heal. So I don't know that completely answered your question, but it's all of the above.

**Diana:** So this was a wildfire like we've never seen before. But we live in a place where there's always has been range fires. You probably have some family history of range fires or some stories. How would you compare this?

**Greg:** There's no comparison.

**Diana:** When you left Dodge that day, perceiving that this was going to be a regular wildfire...

**Greg:** I figured that it would be a regular fire, I mean maybe 4 or 5,000 acres and they'll get it stopped. "They" in quotations. "They" always get it stopped. Because it was a monster unlike anything we'd ever seen, none of us knew what was coming towards us. If we'd had, we'd never have got out of bed that morning. We might have burned down, but it's something that I... At my age bracket, I missed being drafted, eligible for the draft, in Vietnam. Vietnam closed in '74; they were about to shut it down then.

So in '74, I was two years away from being in draftable service, but there's something weird in my makeup because you saw all that during your time period. I know that I didn't, but I felt like I missed something, like I didn't experience something. Well, I experienced Starbuck, that's all I need to see. I'm good.

**Diana:** Can you perceive anything positive that's resulted from the fire?

**Greg:** Many things, many things. The strength of our community, the strength of our people, the blessings of life. You think about the kids in McLean, Texas. Those were beautiful people. They were youngsters in their 20's, in the prime of life. One couple was fixing to get married. There's a life they'll never have; it was snuffed out.

For our community, I look back on it and we easily, easily... When you hear all the stories, we could have buried 15 or 20 people. This Starbuck Fire for Ashland, Kansas, would have left a different taste in all of our mouths if we had started going to a bunch of funerals. So you talk about the positives and the goodness of that: God looked out for Ashland, Kansas, that day and for a lot of people. That's the beauty of it. So I see nothing but positives coming out of it.

**Diana:** So what can you do, or have you done, to prepare for a future fire? What can the community do or have they done?

**Greg:** One of the things was that we leaned on the Anderson Creek fire heavily, watching them replace their fences and infrastructure going back. We copied them. So yes, was it more expensive? But we're investing back into our business and our ranch. But we went back in with pipe corner posts. We went back in with steel t-posts.

One of the things that somebody sent me early on and I threw it in my desk drawer and didn't ever go back to look at it until later when we had time to breathe and make a plan. I thought, well maybe this might work. But there was a fellow that sent me a deal about what I call "ring posts." But they are pipe posts with wire ring washers welded onto them which you could lay the wire into and then close the washer, so the washer acts as a staple. So they're eight foot by two inches and they have a large anchor wedge welded towards the bottom of the post. You drive this post into the ground and it's driven in with a vibrator on a skid steer. So you don't have to dig a hole. You don't have to tamp it and put the dirt back in. It just goes in place. So where we normally would have put a wood post, whether it was creosote or hedge, we put in these ring pipe posts. So in essence, we have put back a steel and pipe fence everywhere we could. The irony of all of that, unfortunately for all of us, we had a little test run on March 5 of this year and on some of the same area that we'd rebuilt the fence that fire blew through those brand-new pipe fences. It was beautiful. It just went on and everything was fine.

So hopefully, in future generations when they do have fires, the fences will still be standing when they go back out to check what disaster had taken place. Then community-wise, the funny thing after that fire on March 5 of 2018, I had one of the local leaders call, and he goes, "Well, how's your blood pressure?" Knowing who he was, I said, "Well, are you still in the command center post?" He goes, "I just left the command center!" But they had already gone into action, much earlier I assume than they did in 2017, but the community was prepared.

The difference in getting that fire stopped, which all of us were aghast, a year to the day. I mean, the first Monday in March and here we go again. Everybody's like, "You have got to be kidding me." But when the call went out for help that time and they weren't fighting everywhere else, they got everything in here with all assets and hammered it down and shut it down on the same kind of a day. That shows you what could have been done. But there was preparedness and there was readiness; they were good to go. They hit it and got it put out. So the lessons have been learned. I think, as time goes by, those that continue to live here will have to look back, "What did they do?" But it was also interesting and a pride factor, when the Montana fires started up throughout the summer of 2017, a lot of those communities up there followed the model of what Ashland did. So the outside world was watching us too.

And that's been one of the portions of the story that if there's any pressure point to it, so many of the outside world have poured in their resources, whether it be hay, supplies, cash contributions. They're investing in Ashland. It is up to those of us that are residents; it's up to us to rebuild it and not waste their resources and their investment in us as a community.

So I think everybody's learned something. You have to go forward.

**Diana:** You said you gave a lot of interviews right after the fire to newspapers and stuff. Then you've gone to different organizations and kind of spread the word of what you did and how things happened. What are some of the things that they are most interested in learning that you learned from the fire?

**Greg:** Oh, a lot of it is what we just talked about, how you rebuild.

**Diana:** What about your cattle? Because you said you lost a lot of bred cattle and there weren't a whole lot of cattle salvaged afterward. Did you notice a lot of effects on those cattle like breathing problems or stuff like that after the fire?

**Greg:** Interestingly enough there was not. As we talked about earlier, if you had fire effects, you were dead. But later on, one of the things that we noticed the following fall when the first-calf heifers started to calve. A lot of those had been salvaged or saved because they were on wheat pasture but from what I'm fixing to say, I think they had to get to the wheat pasture. We had a lot of foot issues where it took that much time for it to express itself. In the first portion of the calving season, with the stress that they endured, we saw early abortions where the calves were being born 30 days early. My thought process is, "How could you live through that hell-fire inferno and then almost be within 30 days of calving, but yet now is the stress time that the calves were born premature and dead?"

The cows that had trouble with those kind of calvings, for whatever reason, they didn't dilate. So little 50 pound calves, if you didn't get them pulled out, the mothers themselves died. We saw instances of that. So foot issues and just probably delayed stress or stress that finally expressed itself in those forms. But the interesting thing about the cattle that were confined and did consume a lot of smoke, we didn't have any issues of that.

One of the things that scared me to death and I didn't even want to ask the question, but for 48 hours a lot of the bulls that were going to be in the bull sale were in the prevailing wind, and the wind was forcing all that burning hay smoke into them. Well, the veterinarians told us, "You'll know in a week." Fortunately, they stayed bright; they stayed eating. We didn't have any effects that way.

**Diana:** When you go out and give these programs and show the slides of the area at the time, what are some of the comments that you get back from the people that weren't here and didn't experience it?

**Greg:** Sometimes it's not so much comments as there are sobs. That's one of the reactions. Literally, you have people sobbing in the crowd. Because they asked you to come, you try not to flower it up. I mean this is what happened, and these are the pictures of reality. You show the lines of dead cattle piled up and the mass graves. But then, we also show the goodness of the trucks unloading supplies and the people coming in and the happier side of it. A lot of them want to know your original emotions and what happened. One of the things that I came quickly to understand is, you can never stop.

In the aftermath, all of us, whether it is community-wise or individual-wise, but personally you just kept moving. So one of the good things, they're not with us anymore, but my mother died June 22nd of this year and she somewhat experienced Starbuck. I don't know if she knew much about it, but Ashland was evacuated and she was in the nursing home. She was evacuated to Woodward and there are some funny stories that go with that. But Mom and Dad were excellent teachers, so every day of our life unbeknownst to us, we have been in training. So in the aftermath of this, we didn't

know that we knew what to do, but we kept moving and we did it.

So that's one of the great things about it. Mark had talked in one of his talks, he goes, "I have never known if our generation could ever measure up to the Greatest Generation the World War II veterans. I've told people we've had it tough, but we didn't have to charge the beaches of Normandy and then fight our way to Berlin. But we had an opportunity for us in this community to have a challenge and step up and meet it. And I think we've done well." But the people in those places, it's hard to show pictures and get the drama of those of us that lived it. I mean, you were literally in an apocalyptic landscape.

In one of the talks, I said, "I don't want to be overdramatic here, but this is a biblical event. Everything is gone." To portray that to your audience, pictures don't do it justice. But they're curious about things we've talked about today. "How did you deal with the dead cattle? How did you rebuild? How did you get financial help? How did you deal with the onslaught of help?" It's interesting, but Mark has had the opportunity to go to speak on this. He was a speaker in Nashville, Tennessee, at a large certified Angus beef presentation. There were 850 people there, and when he walked off the stage, they were giving him a standing ovation, all crying. After that, they have a big fund-raising auction for a golf tournament. There are several great big corporate sponsors. They had the auction, and then the guys that were the big contributors to this, they got together and they said, "Let's send all that money to the Ashland Foundation." And they wrote a check for \$87,000. That was all because of his talk and his presentation. Those people had no idea that they were going to do that, but that's been the response of some of them, "Let's do more, let's help." So that poured right into the Ashland Foundation. So it's been good to go out and tell our story. But as I've said before now, as time's passed, a lot of people say, "I'll bet you're tired of talking about the fire." I may be one of your last people, but for good or bad, the Starbuck Fire is part of our history. It's now part of our story.

**Diana:** Do you have other thoughts?

**Greg:** I'm glad to be alive and I'm glad I've experienced something! A lot of us, those that hear this or read this later on in history, long after this, maybe can't comprehend how much turmoil our country has been in leading up to that time period. But we got to see the goodness of mankind firsthand and how good people really are and their kindness and generosity. That's one of the beautiful things to come out of this deal. Those are the thoughts and I'm proud to be from Ashland, Kansas.