

Diana: What is your name?

Brandon: My name is Brandon Grigsby.

Diana: Where do you live?

Brandon: I live north of Ashland approximately ten to thirteen miles.

Diana: What's your occupation?

Brandon: I am a loan officer for Stockgrowers State Bank and I also run some cattle on the side.

Diana: How old you?

Brandon: I turned 40 in July.

Diana: When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to as "the fire".

Brandon: You know, it started that morning with people talking about it in at the bank. There had been some smoke coming from the southwest portion of the county with the winds that were howling out of the southwest, all day, carrying the smoke towards Ashland. So between that and just visiting with customers, we were kind of aware of the general vicinity.

Diana: What was your first reaction when you heard about the fire?

Brandon: My first reaction was that I was thinking that we have a good volunteer fire crew who are well-versed with dealing fires, grass fires, of this type. There is a lot of experience on our fire department. Between us, Oklahoma, Englewood, and Minneola fire departments, I really thought they'd have it under control before it got anywhere near where it did. But the wind was so massive that they just flat couldn't.

Diana: So what were your first thoughts and actions when you learned that the fire was getting close to where you lived?

Brandon: They evacuated the town and the bank was shut down about 3. At that time, the winds were still howling out of the southwest pretty hard towards Ashland, which was why they were evacuating Ashland. I started driving home on the Mt. Jesus road to the east of Ashland, going north/northeast from Ashland, and I noticed that there was some smoke in the skyline clear up north, which was a separate fire from the original Starbuck Fire down south. That got my attention, especially when you get up on Mt. Jesus Road, where you can see a long ways.

So I was on my way home when I saw that smoke line and started calling some ranchers up in that country that I had phone numbers of and asking them it was going, mainly because I knew the grass fuel around my house was unbelievable from the last couple fantastic summers that we've had. There were massive weeds and grass in the fields around my house.

Diana: So you have mostly pastures around where your house is?

Brandon: Yes, it's mostly pasture, and then I've got, immediately around where my house is, CRP that's a two

year old stand. It was Conservation Reserve Program grass that had some massive six foot tall weeds in it, and things like that, being a young stand of grass. So there was a huge, huge amount of fuel there around the house.

Diana: So you had lots of cattle around your house?

Brandon: I did, but not immediately around my house. My cows were on their winter grass, which is a mile to the west of my house. I have a little pasture there that I try to winter in that has some canyons in it. It makes a good winter home for them. That's where I was calving out at the time.

Diana: So what kind of things did you do to protect your property?

Brandon: Well, when I first got home, I talked to several of the ranchers up there on that north fire. They thought they were going to get it with tractors and disks and kind of contain it and get it pushed up into the wheat fields between there and Bucklin. So, I didn't really think that we were in immediate danger, because that's about eight miles to the north of me. Visiting with those guys, they didn't really seem that stressed about the north fire at that time. They were mainly worried about the one from the south.

Our area has a history of winds dying down once it gets dark, so that fire becomes a lot slower moving and is actually controllable. So when I got home, I'd already talked to these guys and thought that the north fire was going to stay north and we had quite a bit of time before the south fire got there. So I decided to have my wife and daughters pack some stuff up, just in case. Because it was moving away from us at that time, all we had to worry about was a slow moving back-fire, burning really slow and gradual into the wind. If the winds had kept the way they were, or even died, if we'd had a normal fire and no winds, we'd have had six to eight hours before it even got to my place, in a normal fire situation.

Because of that, I decided to have my wife and daughters pack, just in case, and had my 11-year-old son, at the time, Britt, come and help move cows. I jumped on the four wheeler and he jumped in the feed truck and we went out to the west pasture to move cows. But a neighbor of mine, Danny Rich, called me and asked what I was doing. So he said, "I'll just come over and help you." So he showed up on his four-wheeler, too. He lives about three miles to my southeast, on Bluff Creek. We got out to the pasture to move our cows. I was literally calving at the time and had two brand-new babies down in some canyons in that pasture. That pasture has some draws in it where grass gets above your head, just big rank grass in all the draws where those cows were calving. So we were off the four-wheelers looking for calves and trying to get everything to start moving. I even debated, because the fire was so far away and going the opposite way at the time, the north fire, anyway, whether to even move them or not.

I decided, since we were there, to go ahead and move them about three miles to the southeast to a wheat pasture that my father-in-law, Brad Pike, has. So we started moving them and Britt was honking the horn and drawing them out of the canyon. Danny and I were on four-wheelers trying to get everything found and baby calves found and out of the weeds so that they'd follow their mothers. That's when the wind switched out of the north.

When it switched out of the north, it switched with a vengeance, to the point where we couldn't hardly talk four or five feet apart because the wind was howling so bad.

Diana: How soon did the smoke show up?

Brandon: We had just gotten out of the pasture, or we were just about out of the pasture. We couldn't find all

the new-born babies in that tall grass, and when the wind switched, that smoke immediately (within five minutes of it switching) started coming our way and we could smell it, and it started burning our eyes. We immediately knew that the seven to ten mile long backfire that was burning to the southwest back into the wind, had become the head fire. That thing was moving just unbelievably fast. So we left with whatever we had, and got them drove out of that pasture. Britt was leading them in the pickup. I had my phone stuck in my shirt pocket on speaker, talking to Britt. I had a new-born baby calf that couldn't hardly walk, across my lap on the four-wheeler.

Danny was pushing cows and I was pushing cows and we started moving them across the field. We got about half a mile from the CRP field that they were in, between there and my house, that's when we got close enough that the smoke got so bad that we flat couldn't hardly see.

Diana: Could you breathe?

Brandon: Not very good. It was burning your eyes and burning your lungs pretty bad. We were moving them, and all of a sudden the cows blew back up on Danny and I and started running back past us back to the pasture where we'd just come from. My dog took off after them, I'd had him on the four-wheeler with me. He usually rides with me, and he took off after them. Finally, the smoke and the wind kind of cleared up enough that I could see. I was talking to Britt and said, "Britt, what's going on? The cows are coming back." All of a sudden, I could see my older daughter, Reese, on a four-wheeler with her friend, Grant Gillum. They were on their four-wheeler and had come out to help us. Well, they couldn't see where we were at, in the smoke, coming out to help us, and they spooked the cattle back on us. So in the wind, I was screaming at her, I finally got close enough to where they could hear me. I said, "You guys, it's too dangerous. You just go, get out of here. Get out of here."

I turned to go back after the cows, where last I saw them, running through the weeds. That's when Danny and I collided with our four-wheelers, because we couldn't see each other. I kind of tipped mine over a bit, and caught it with my foot, but I lost the calf off my lap. I'm yelling in my phone for Britt to just go, get out there on the county road and get out of here, it was getting too dangerous. I heard him say, "Dad, the smokes too bad. I can't see anything."

I said, "Bud, you just keep driving on the trail. Go straight ahead. When you get out on the county road, keep going." By then, I'd grabbed the calf by the back legs and drug him back on my four-wheeler. Danny took off after cows the way he saw them go, and I went off in the smoke a different way. I'm yelling at Britt, "Britt, are you okay?" There was no answer, and I reached down in my pocket, and my phone was gone. So I didn't know where he was, or his status, and I didn't know where my daughter was, for sure, and I finally ran into some cows and got them going back in the direction I thought they should go.

I finally found a fence line and Danny. Anyway, we got them kicked out on the road and started moving them on down through the road through there. My father-in-law shows up and that fire was coming so hard and so fast that it was jumping the road behind us.

Diana: Could you see flames?

Brandon: Oh yeah. The flames were tree-top high, swirling into the air. There were tumbleweeds going as high as the REA lines, on fire. It was unbelievable. I have never seen something moving that big and that fast. I burned a lot of pastures in the Flint Hills and never came close to anything like this. Of course, you burn there when there is no wind, the wind then was unbelievable.

Diana: Did it keep switching? The wind?

Brandon: You know, it literally moved from clear up there by the lake. In my west pasture, Danny and I were up on a hill-top, sitting there talking about whether we needed to move them or not, 30 minutes before that, probably, maybe 45 minutes before that. Then all of a sudden it's crossing the road behind us.

Diana: So were you able to save any of the cattle?

Brandon: I got most of my cattle moved. I did have some behind my house on the creek, too. I had some on the west pasture with calves we couldn't find, and a couple cows that we lost in the fire and smoke, that we didn't get gathered back. But most of them we got out on the road and moved. I never did get back into the pasture, because I was worried about my family, because I didn't have my phone.

I went back to my house, and my father-in-law came through the smoke and flames in his pickup. My father-in-law as there and had his phone. He reassured me that my family was okay. I ran into the house to make sure nobody was there. I knew the vehicles were gone, and I was praying that Reese didn't run back on foot leaving the four-wheeler. I had found the four-wheeler on the county road, abandoned. I didn't know where her and her friend Grant went. I got back to the house, and there were two vehicles there. I knew, my wife had gone, because her vehicle was gone. I was terrified that Reese went back, and I had no idea where Britt was. His vehicle, the flat bed, wasn't there. Brad reassured me again that they were all okay.

When I got back to the house, my house was on fire, it was burning a hole in the wall about the size of a 50 gallon drum. It was kind of strange, it was on the northwest corner of the house on a porch area. I think it must have been that some tumble weeds coming through there must have got caught on some porch furniture and sat there and burned and started burning the siding. It was already into the studs, through the outer wall and into the studs the size of a 50 gallon drum. The siding was drooping off and melting in the heat. I went inside the house, the house was full of smoke, screamed to make certain nobody was there. I ran back out and the well wasn't working, so my father-in-law grabbed some anti-freeze jugs out of the back of his pickup and I grabbed some out of the shed, along with the dog-water pan that was there. We threw all those on and started running down to the stock tank back and forth with the buckets. I went down to the basement and threw a bunch of water on the seal plate and went into our bedroom, because that was the side of the burning wall. I started throwing water on the wall there too. Somehow, we got it put out and saved my house, other than the hole in the wall where it burned. I couldn't believe it, with the way it burned the studs in the wall.

Diana: So was the fire past your house then?

Brandon: Yes, it was already out in another field. When we moved the cows, we got over to my mail box where there's a T in the road. It had crossed the road behind us and it was over in the pasture on the other side of us, slowly burning. But when it got over in that pasture, the head fire went on, but there was a portion moving slowly back in the other direction, more towards the east. We had to go south to get to the wheat field. Well, we couldn't have gone on east anyway, because by then another portion of the fire was coming up Bluff Creek and was going over the REA poles there and rolling over the bridge there at Bluff Creek and going up that draw. Bluff Creek there has wheat on each side, on the south side of that bridge anyway, it gets over onto some Harden ground. It had wheat on both sides of it. It was going up the grass draws along the creek right there. It crossed the pasture behind my house. It pushed us to the south, we went on maybe another half a mile, moving my cows.

We got them into the wheat pasture there, and the smoke was so bad that you couldn't hardly see. I looked up and a bunch of Miller's cows were coming, which was to the west side of that road, the Mt. Jesus Road, because we had to go south from my road. In Miller's pasture, there were a bunch of cows coming through there, and the fire was pushing up towards the fence. So I threw the gate open. Danny went on home to get his wife ready and get everything out of there.

Brad and I thought, "Well, we'll just kick those cows across the road in with mine." So I went around on one side, and Brad took his pickup around to the other side, next to the flames, and we got cows pushing. The heat was unbearable. It felt like it was burning the hair off your face, your eyebrows and everything. It was just unbelievable heat coming off of it. Then through the smoke, all of a sudden, came a bunch of black cows, which I figured out were mine! They came off of the wheat pasture; they heard Miller's cows and decided to run in the field with theirs, back into the smoke, back in the direction they'd come, and left their baby calves.

Brad and I finally got everything turned and back through there, as the fire was coming up to the fence, we got everything back in that little wheat field of my father-in-law's. I yelled at him to go help Danny, I was going to stay there and hold these cows and keep them from running back into that pasture that was on fire. He took off down the road to help Danny, and I was on a four-wheeler there trying to hold cows. Heat and smoke got to be unbearable coming across that field. It was a little 18- acre patch of wheat with grass on both sides of it, that little field just wasn't big enough to keep you away from the heat and the smoke. I couldn't hardly breathe, and I couldn't hardly see where I was going, but I knew there was a stock tank in the fence line. So I followed the fence line to the stock tank and got off the four-wheeler and jumped in to get my clothes soaking wet. Then I used my shirt to breathe through, my wet shirt to try to filter some smoke. I felt like my eyes were on fire. I got some of that ash off of my face and the soot out of my eyes and everything. Then I got back on the four-wheeler and drove out as it was coming up to the tank, where the grass was. I jumped out of the tank, got back on the four-wheeler and got back out in the wheat field. I used my wet shirt to breathe. Then I sat there, probably for another 20 minutes, and my father-in-law came back through the smoke and the flames in his pickup. Then I got in the pickup with him.

Diana: So where did you find your family?

Brandon: By then, everything was calmed down. As soon as he got there, Brad told me he had talked to them and everybody was fine, including Britt. When he showed up, that put everything at ease, of course. So I called her immediately, she was already over at Coldwater with all the kids, including Tanner Gillum's kids, Garrett and Grant Gillum.

Tanner had sent them up to help me, thinking he was sending them away from the south fire, where they'd be safe. He didn't have any idea that the north fire was going on at the time, or especially that the north wind was going to switch like that. So he ended up inadvertently sending them up with another fire coming.

Then again, if I'd known about the northern front, Britt wouldn't have been out there either. My family would have been gone and I probably wouldn't have moved the cows. But we thought we had all kinds of time.

Of course, she was really shook up. My father-in-law had already called and told her that I was safe, that I was okay. But when I finally called her, I had to talk to Britt a little bit. Britt, when I lost my phone, he lost contact with Danny and I, and he'd thought that Danny and I had died.

Diana: So you had to kind of console him, talk him through it and make sure he knew you were okay.

Brandon: Yes.

Diana: So did you go to Coldwater?

Brandon: No. Anyway, to tell his side of it, he continued on driving up the road. He called my wife. My wife, leaving, had found in the smoke, my 14-year-old daughter, Reese and Grant Gillum on their four-wheeler. Heather had Kashlee, my six-year-old, with her. My wife and Kashlee threw open the gates on the horse pens when she left so they could get out, and then just drove the road. Well, she found Reese and Grant Gillum on the four-wheeler after I'd turned them around. They jumped in with her and just left the four-wheeler. That's why the four-wheeler was abandoned where it was at. Then she was already east of the Lexington building, almost to the curves north of Protection, when Britt calls her and says, "Mom, I've lost contact with Dad. I think he and Danny must have died." He was pretty broke up!

She was just like, "Britt, you've just got to get out. Keep driving, keep driving."

He said, "I don't want to leave them."

She said, "They're going to be fine, you just keep driving." She said, "I'm turning around for you right now. Where are you at?"

He told her, "I don't know, I think I'm on my way to Bucklin. I can't see where I'm going."

She said, "Slow down and open your door. Are you on a gravel road?"

He slowed down and said, "Yes, I'm on a gravel road, but I can't see where I'm going. I'm just trying to keep it between the ditches. I see a little bit of ditch once in a while."

She said, "You just keep driving. When you get to the highway, you turn and go to the Lexington building. I'm coming back and I'll meet you there." When she pulled up to the Lexington building, she said she thought she saw some headlights coming. It was his headlights. It should have been as bright as noon out, it was only four or five o'clock by then, or 4:30, whenever it was at the time. But the smoke was so bad they had headlights on and it just looked like night.

So she got him. They left the pickup there and he jumped in with her and then they all went to Coldwater and were safe there.

Diana: Was it white smoke, grey smoke, black smoke?

Brandon: Both. A little of everything. Coming right off the fire, it was kind of a darkish grayish black. Then when you looked up higher, through the sunlight, it was lighter.

Diana: When they were at the Lexington Schoolhouse, was there fire around them?

Brandon: Not at that time, the fire was to the north of them still, and west of them there. So there at the Lexington Community Building, it didn't get to that building right there, because there were some wheat fields to the north of it and it had to burn slowly back through draws and things like that to get to the Lexington building. It probably didn't get there until dark, but the head fire by then was already way south.

Diana: So what about Danny's place?

Brandon: Danny's place, after my father-in-law came back for me and we'd done everything there at the house, we went over to Danny's place. My father-in-law decided he was going to go check on someone else and I went to Danny's. Danny and I, the rest of the night, stayed north of his house on Bluff Creek. It burned real slow going through Bluff Creek north of his house, because of the wheat field north of his house. It buffered his house. It was going slower up Bluff Creek to the east. So it was dark (really dark, not just smoke-dark). The sun had set by the time it was getting closer to his house. He has an old spray rig on one of his pickups, and we were out fighting the fire with that the rest of the night.

Diana: So did you feel the temperature change?

Brandon: We did! When the wind came through, it was unbelievable, but then with the heat from the fire, it wasn't noticeable until the fire had already passed.

Diana: Were you still having a lot of trouble breathing?

Brandon: I was. My voice was hoarse for probably two weeks afterwards; my eyes burned for at least two weeks from all the smoke and ash and everything. It was intense. I've never seen anything like it in my life, and I've burned a lot of country in the Flinthills. I come from a ranch burning country, and I've never seen anything like this.

Diana: So you have some experience with doing that. How does this compare to a controlled burn? Completely different?

Brandon: Completely different. That fire, literally, went eight miles in just a few minutes, 30 minutes. It went 20 miles in a matter of an hour and a half or two hours. And not just a little quarter-mile head fire, a ten mile long head fire in that short a time. It is unfathomable that it moved like that, that fast. I've never seen a fire move that fast, that widespread. That northern front pushing that long back fire. And I'm sure it did the same thing with the south fire, then, when the wind switched too, and the two fires kind of came in on Ashland.

The way it was burning the rest of the night, I went and checked on some other neighboring properties. The Steve Stevens Ranch started burning later that evening, and he was already out. I went into the feed yard, Ashland Feeders. They had wheat on the north side of their property as well as on the west side, which protected the Ashland Feeders Feedyard. I went in there and washed my face real good at about 2 in the morning and tried to clean up and clean my eyes up. Then I tried to make my way back across the country towards Ashland. I kept going back home all night long, making sure the fire didn't start up and hoping my dog would show up again, that was helping me move cattle. He never did show up all night long.

My wife, Heather, and the kids made their way back into Protection and stayed with Janell Smit at Neil Kay's place there in Protection, even though they'd evacuated Protection. By late, late evening, 2 in the morning, the head fires had passed, except for some small back fire spots. They made their way to Protection and felt safe enough to do that.

About 3 in the morning, Danny's place was fine. I was content that my house was not going to start back on fire, so I decided... it was still full of smoke and no power, of course, nothing. So I decided to try to make it into Ashland and get some sleep at a friend of mine's house. Even though Ashland had been evacuated by then, the head fire had passed it. Trying to get through, the power lines were down on the roads all over, because of

the power poles burned off. So I couldn't get back to Ashland by any of the roads, no matter which direction I went. I backtracked clear around up by Clark County Lake and couldn't go that way, bridges were burned out. I'm up there, and a deputy sheriff had even lost a patrol car on one of those bridges that had burned out.

I came back across and started using a ranch trail road that I knew across pastures to get back to town. Of course, there were still fires going on all around these pastures down in the draws, trees that were still burning, even though the grass was burned off by then. I passed hundreds of head of cattle standing there, completely burned up, either dead or walking blind because their eyes were burned out of them. I got just north of Ashland on the Lake Road, and because of all the spots still on fire, even with my headlights, you couldn't hardly see until you were on something, just about to hit something. I was just keeping it between the ditches. All of a sudden, a power line bounced off the top of my pickup, just north of town, just north of where Mary and Mark Kaltenbach's place would be.

Finally, I got into town about 4 a.m. and got into my friend's place there. The town was evacuated except for a few emergency vehicles that stuck it out. My friend told me where the key to his house was, and I just went and stayed at his place. I took a bath, and my face was blistered up on my nose and on my cheeks. It finally scabbed over a few days later. That was pretty intense.

I went back the next morning, made my way back through the pastures up to my house. Of course, the REA poles were still down across the roads and I had to cut across pastures. It looked like Mars.

Diana: Was there a lot of ash? Or was it gone?

Brandon: It was still there, everything was still covered in black ash, except for the sand. You could either see sand or ash, mostly gravel and sand. The wind was blowing so hard that a lot of the ash and soot ended up in the canyons or the draws and ditches. I got back to my place, and Heather and the kids came back across country from Protection and met at our house at about 9 in the morning. We looked at the damage there at the house and the outbuildings and the tractors burned up and things like that at my house.

Diana: Did you lose a lot of buildings?

Brandon: One of our implement sheds, it melted the insulation out of it and the skylights, it melted them, bowed them out like bubbles. It was pretty wild, but it is all steel, so the structure was still there. My garage was all steel, so that structure was still there. It burned clear around my house and burned a hole through the wall. I lost all the trees in the windbreak to the south of my house. I lost all my massive cottonwood trees, the kids played house in one of the trees, and some massive 100 year old walnut trees in the backyard. Those big trees are the main reason we put our house there.

Of course, all my fences were down. Most of my corrals were made of railroad ties I'd bought off the railroad and dug the holes and put in. It burned 99% of those out. My corrals were on the ground.

Diana: Did you lose any horses?

Brandon: My horses, I found them about 2 in the morning on the county road to the east of my house about three miles, down by Ashland Feeders. They were standing in the road. There was a wheat field to the north of them that Ashland Feeders had some stockers on that they were grazing. So I got out, pulled the posts and laid the fence on the ground and ran them over into that wheat field and put the fence back up to leave them there. They didn't have a burned hair on them, my horses were fine. Apparently they ran down the road and



got away from it and got in front of that wheat field where they were okay. But I didn't know where they were at until about 2 in the morning.

The next day, when I did get back, we started counting cattle and thankfully, none that we moved were dead.

Diana: Were there any you had to shoot?

Brandon: Well, the crazy, wild thing is that some of the cattle that we couldn't move were standing there still breathing, blind, no hair on them. They looked like a bald mouse, just suffering, just trying to stand there and breathe. They couldn't walk, couldn't see. It just made you sick. Calves burned were just stripped bald of their hair. They just looked like a leather handbag sitting there curled up when they were burned up. I found one heifer and one cow that I shot, that didn't make it as well. I had to shoot them, but I knew they were way beyond help and in unbelievable pain.

You know, I got out to my west pasture to see how many were left, or how many we missed when they blew up on us, and my dog pops up in one of the draws! Anyway, the kids were with me at the time, they opened the door and he come and jumps in the pickup, and there was not a burned hair on him. Probably five minutes before we found him, I was driving across the field and there was a dead canine burned up, curled just like those calves. I got out and thought it was Doc. Well, the blue heeler didn't have a tail, and he only had three legs from being hit the year before. He'd had to have the leg amputated, I got out and it had four legs and a tail! So, I knew that's a coyote, that's not him! Then about five minutes later, he shows up, and there wasn't a burned hair on him. I don't know if he got in the pond or where he rode it out, but he was perfect. There were dead deer, dead coyotes, and of course, dead cows, and yet he was perfect.

Diana: So did you have to bury a lot?

Brandon: I did, I had to bury several. Honestly, the winds blew hard for two weeks straight after that, to the point where we had a dust bowl going on. You couldn't see five feet outside the front door of the house. So by the time we got to the point we needed to bury some of our livestock, probably half of them were already buried from the drifting of the soot and the sand and everything else over the top of those draws. You couldn't even find them.

Diana: So on your house. You didn't have electricity there for a while? And it had smoke in it, so how long did it take to get your house where you could live in it?

Brandon: I can't even remember the dates now, probably a month and a half.

Diana: So where'd you stay?

Brandon: I stayed at Tanner Gillum's house, here in Ashland, and then in our little, bitty house we have that the kids stay in. That's where we ended up staying for that period. We had some crews come in and they tried to get the smoke out of everything. They took all of our textiles and all of our furniture and our clothes and left us with nothing except the stuff we had before the fire. All our hats, boots, everything. Blankets, towels, they took everything. We didn't get those back for probably 45 days or 60 days after the fire.

Diana: Did you have lots of volunteers come help?

Brandon: You know, the out-pouring of people was unbelievable. Rural America and the area, everybody showed up. It really restores your faith in mankind. I mean, just people that you had no idea who they

were. People, let alone the local volunteers that always stick together in small communities, unbelievable. Ashland is an unbelievable community, but it solidified that after the fire. The U.S in general and agriculture, families across the nation, sending unbelievable amounts of hay to help us feed our livestock.

Diana: Did you get some hay?

Brandon: I did. I got hay from some trucks that came through. It saved us from having to haul livestock completely off. Also, I was fortunate enough to have some of my summer grass over by Protection, and the fire did not quite reach that far. So instead of waiting until the middle of May to turn out on the summer grass, I ended up hauling things over there the next day off that wheat pasture. Mick Sharp of Ashland Feeders and my family hauled panels over there and caught cattle. My father, brother, and I hauled the cows of Miller's that we saved back to them and onto their wheat pasture, and hauled mine over to Protection. With the help, again, of volunteers and Ashland Feedyard employees and the manager, Mick Sharp. He came up to help and brought his pens. Then the outpouring ever since has been unbelievable. The countless hours given by the community and businesses makes you proud to call Ashland home.

Diana: So, has your grass come back?

Brandon: It has. The draws look fantastic. The hilltops and hillsides look just fair, but we were blessed again by the Lord to have a really good, wet summer. We averaged above-average rainfall this summer, which really helped our recovery as far as getting the ground covered. The CRP grass didn't come back very good; it was only a two year old established grass, so it's just spotty grass at best. So we had to go in and plant cover crops. That comes at a cost, of course. But I had to stop it from blowing somehow. Phil Harden helped in that category, helping me get that drilled back.

Again, it really restored my faith in humanity. The outpouring. People are unbelievable, just volunteers and everything that they had given.

Diana: Did you take advantage of the meals that they were preparing in Ashland at the camp, or at the school during that time?

Brandon: I did not, where we were, you know, our fire department, God Bless them, were fighting that fire to the south all morning long and trying to protect homes and property down there. I'm one of the fortunate few that was able to save his house, just out of blind stupidity, in looking for my family and things like that and making sure everybody was okay. I mean the house to the north of me is gone, the three Giles girls lost their homes, the Filson cabin a mile south of me is gone. The Seacat house a mile and a half to the southeast of me is gone. The Filson house four miles to the southeast of me is gone. Vernon Howell's house five miles south of me, Rod and Patty Young on the Miller Ranch, four miles to the south of me, they're all gone. I mean, it just blows my mind that we still had a structure that we could build from, and that my belongings inside made it through, other than the smoke being inside. We were pretty fortunate in that aspect.

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

Brandon: Not knowing where my family was, and the sick feeling in my gut when I realized my phone was gone. Not knowing where Britt was when I couldn't see, even though he should have only been a hundred yards from me. And not knowing if he was okay and still driving the right direction. Not knowing where Reese and Grant were when I found their four-wheeler in the road. No knowing where Heather and Kashlee were. Losing contact with Danny in the smoke and hoping he was going the right way. And you know, making sure

my wife and kids were out of the house and gone. When it come across that field that fast, again, that thing should have been six hours plus before it reached my house. If the wind had not changed like it did, I don't know what... instead, it got there in a heartbeat.

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

Brandon: During the fire?

Diana: Or after.

Brandon: During the fire, our fire departments were spread so thin because it was such a massive area. There was nobody available up in the Lexington Community. There weren't any fire departments up there for three or four days after trying to find hot spots. They had their hands full with the main fire down in Oklahoma. You couldn't leave those homes to go fight something up north that was moving so fast. They couldn't have drove up there that fast anyway. So there's no way they could have got up there in time. Then if they would have, they'd have been leaving other homes and Ashland. They couldn't have done that. But afterwards, all the volunteers, were extremely helpful. The Farm Service Agency, NRCS, the conservation district, they've been trying to get programs out and to try to clarify those programs. But the local businesses, the volunteers that have donated fencing and wonderful, and have been extremely helpful and beneficial. And the local contractors, I had Darren Seacat and Keith Carter hired to help put my house back in order. The countless community volunteers and businesses. My employer, Stockgrowers State Bank, and extended family/co-workers have put in countless volunteer hours.

Diana: So did you take advantage of things like the KLA and the community foundation?

Brandon: Yes. The community foundation was unbelievable, the volunteers there have given a tremendous amount of time and effort. KLA and WRCA were very helpful. The community foundation, and the volunteers down at Ashland Feed and Seed taking hay in, an unbelievable amount of hours from those volunteers. That went on for months and months after. It is still going on, to this day, in October. I think they're still putting volunteer time in on some of that. We are very fortunate to have these volunteers and businesses.

Diana: So did you take advantage of the posts and the wire?

Brandon: Yes, we got some posts and wire, and we're taking advantage of some of that. It has helped us put quite a bit of fence in that way.

Diana: How long did you stay off work from your job at the bank?

Brandon: You know, now looking back, I don't know for sure. At least a week, if not two weeks. Stockgrowers State Bank, where I work, and the Berryman family and Kendel Kay, the president, have been extremely helpful, understanding people. Stockgrowers State Bank, I know as well, there's a lot of volunteer work coming out of there. The people I work with are like family. They picked up the slack during my absence. They have been unbelievable people to lean on. Like Ashland in general. It is a great community to live in.

Diana: So can you perceive of anything positive that has resulted from the fire?

Brandon: You know, it has brought everybody closer. I guarantee that, families are closer. It makes you

appreciate what you have even more, that everybody is healthy, that more people weren't injured in the fire is unbelievable. It was an act of God, that with all the volunteer firemen that came in from all over the country, coming into this area, with all the massive canyons that we have, and going around in the smoke, that nobody was hurt. It is unbelievable... God was watching over us.

Honestly, it restores your faith in humanity. The tremendous outpouring and generosity coming from across the nation really opens your eyes. You turn the news on, and you get a lot of negative, that's what makes it news. The tremendous outpouring of generosity from across the nation often gets overlooked, all the good in the world. This really brought it out front and in the limelight.

Diana: Can you do something to prepare for another event like this?

Brandon: I don't know that you can ever be prepared for something like this, as far as how fast it was moving and the massive amount of fire that came through. One thing that I'm trying to do with the ground around my house, the CRP, is to build a firebreak or food plot situations to where it will at least help protect some of my structures if we ever get to that point again. So yes, there are some programs out there like that, and the USDA is allowing that to happen as well. From what I understand, it is going to be a major benefit in the future if that ever happens again.

Of course, I'm going to try to use those programs to maintain that grass to where it will be a lot easier to control in that situation. If that situation could ever be controlled, I mean, you can't.

Diana: So what about the community, what type of plans can they make?

Brandon: You know, as far as the community goes, I think truly that there are very few communities that could have handled the emergency that we went through in the fashion that we did. The key personnel and the key businesses that we had in place to be able to handle it and the unbelievable volunteer base that we have in place here. That includes the facilities, including our church camp, that we were able to put up volunteers coming in, the high school that we were able to use. I really think our emergency management crew did a fantastic job for what they had to work with in a limited time and the unprecedented amount of speed and size of the fire, the scope of the fire that they were having to deal with. I really don't know how you could have changed anything else, unless you could triple the size of the fire department, and that's just not feasible in our small, rural communities.

Diana: So, do you have any other thoughts or things you'd like to share about this experience?

Brandon: I hope it never happens again! I pray that it never happens again! My heart goes out to the gentleman who did lose his life in the fire. I just thank God that nobody else was injured or hurt in it. Hopefully, next time, as far as the ground that I've got, we'll have more food plots in it, to where it won't be as severe on my own property. I would never again dream of putting my family out there in harm's way trying to... as much as we care for our livestock, put them out there. Looking back, with Danny Rich, I thought we had forever and a day to move those baby calves and cows at a slow walk and go back to the house. I thought I was going to spend the rest of the evening sitting there watching to make sure it didn't go back through or go north to help others after I got my family out safe. I really didn't think there was any urgency at the time because we're mainly open grassland and can see where a fire is at several miles away. But when it changed out of the north, it took all of those homes around me in a matter of minutes, mine as well.