



Sarah Hamill

Diana: Today is March 7th, 2018. What is your name?

Sarah: Sarah Hamill.

Diana: Where do you live?

Sarah: Ashland, Kansas.

Diana: What is your occupation?

Sarah: Food Service Director for U.S.D. 220, Ashland High School.

Diana: Okay and how old are you?

Sarah: Thirty-nine.

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

We were eating lunch; it was about 12:30, after we served the kids. We were eating lunch and we saw a lot of smoke outside and went outside to be "Looky-Loos" and noticed that there was ash falling already in town. We didn't know how bad it was yet, but we knew something big was coming. So we hadn't heard anything yet about anything. We just went out there and took some pictures.

Diana: Could you see the sun through the clouds or through the smoke?

Sarah: The smoke was slowly going over the sun when we went out there. So the sun was still partially...

Diana: So it was still starting to come to town. Did you evacuate?

Sarah: Not at that point, no. My family and I evacuated about 4:30 or 5. We didn't even know there was an evacuation until we went outside and the sheriffs came by, telling everybody to get out of town.

Diana: So usually after you feed the children and you have lunch, then you have to clean up and get ready for the next day. So you're there at the school for a little bit?

Sarah: Yes. We eat for a little bit and then it usually takes us around 30 to 45 minutes to clean up afterwards.

Diana: So by then, things were getting a little bit hazier?

Sarah: Yes.

Diana: So you have a son that was going to school?

Sarah: In elementary school.

Diana: Did you have to go pick him up?

Sarah: Yes, I had to pick him up from school and we still didn't know there was an evacuation. We just knew that they were sending the kids home early in case of one.

Diana: Was there an announcement at the high school about what they were doing?

Sarah: We did not hear one.

Diana: So you can't hear that in the cafeteria.

Sarah: We don't have a speaker in our kitchen. In the cafeteria, we do, but once we close the doors and shut the window, we can't hear anything in there.

Diana: How did you find out that you needed to go pick your son up?

Sarah: I called his teacher to see if he was going to have tutoring and she said, "No. You need to come pick him up right now." She was leaving. By the time I got there, she was running to her vehicle. I think she lives in Meade, the old third-grade teacher, Mrs. Amerine. She was ready to get out of town.

Diana: So did you hear the evacuation notice or did someone come around and tell you? You don't have an IRIS (Integrated Risk Information System) alert on your phone?

Sarah: At that point, I had not signed up for it. I was on Facebook and saw a post from Shayla Underwood saying that we needed to get out of town now. And we were just kind of like, "What's going on?" Because we could still see the sun; it was still light out. So we went outside and we were like, "Should we really go, or shouldn't we?" So we ended up not going until the sheriff came by to say, "You guys need to leave."

Diana: About what time would you say that was?

Sarah: It was probably about 4:30.

Diana: Which direction did you go?

Sarah: We went east toward Coldwater.

Diana: So did you take a bunch of things with you? Did you prepare to stay or how long did you think you were going to be gone?

Sarah: We all packed an overnight bag. We figured it was just one night, that's all we packed clothes for. We have two dogs and we grabbed the dogs. I can't think of what else we packed. I know I forgot to grab pictures. I remember being really upset that I forgot to grab pictures because, in the emergency state, you don't really think of everything you need to grab.

Diana: So did you drive through any smoke?

Sarah: We did. It was getting darker and it was getting smokier here as we were leaving town. So it was almost like it was nighttime by the time we left town.

Diana: Did you see fire?

Sarah: Not then. We went to Coldwater and ate dinner and decided to try to come back. That's when we drove through the bad stuff trying to get back to town on the back roads by Sitka.

Diana: You went south of Sitka?

Sarah: It wasn't the best way to go.

Diana: So was there fire on both sides?

Sarah: Yes, it was getting really dark, like there was a black wall right in front of us that our lights wouldn't even shine through to the other side. I told Kurt Watson (Gib Krier's grandson), "You know, this makes me nervous. We don't know what's on the other side of that." He went ahead and drove through; at that point there was fire on both sides of the road.

Diana: High fires or down on the ground?

Sarah: It was pretty high; it was a pretty high fire. It was by some of the gas tanks and stuff over there. We were driving right by it and embers were blowing across the road. He started going through the black and we could see barely see the fire. It was close enough to see that it was all the way across the road. So he backed up for about a mile and we got turned around. We saw a couple of fire tornadoes and decided to go back to Coldwater at that point.

Diana: Do you remember what time it was.

Sarah: I know that the road was closed. The highway was closed at Protection because that's where we turned to try to get home, the Protection junction. I think at that point the fire was across the road and we saw the fire across the road when we got back up to the highway. That was probably maybe a quarter mile away from us to the west.

Diana: Right. So when you went back to Coldwater, where did you go?

Sarah: We ended up going to Medicine Lodge. We knew some people there and they had a hotel room for us. We weren't sure how our animals would be able to stay anywhere at the high school. We knew that since we took that little journey, all the cots would be taken up and we'd be sleeping in the car. So we were lucky to be able to get a hotel.

Diana: And they accommodated your pets?

Sarah: Yes, right.

Diana: So when did you decide to return?

Sarah: Not until we got the message. I'm trying to think; I think it was on Facebook. Or no, we were watching the emergency page because there was a page that they were putting updates on itself. It finally said that we were able to return, so we jumped in the car, and we came back because Kurt has family here and we didn't know how their ranches were. We really didn't have time to talk to any of them. They didn't have time to talk to us, let's say, but we were worried about them and about getting back to them and helping them with whatever they needed from us.

Diana: So when did you find out that school had been canceled?

Sarah: School didn't get canceled until I got back into town. I called Mr. Wettig when we pulled into our driveway. I said, "What do I need to do? We can open up the kitchen. I know there's a lot of firemen that are out here helping us, I'm sure. What can we do as a kitchen? How can we help?" Because I knew we didn't have school that day. He said he'd call me back and then I got the call and he told me to come up there. I hadn't had

time to shower or anything, it was very embarrassing, but I had a meeting with him and Mr. Endicott and we decided to go ahead and put some sandwiches together for our firemen that were here. So I volunteered all the kitchen staff without really asking them. I just sent a text. "By the way..."

Diana: Were most of them in town?

Sarah: Yes.

Diana: How many on your staff?

Sarah: Two, at that point I had three, but now it's two. My baker showed up the first day and Juanita showed up that day. Ann Daily was unable to show up, she had her own stuff going on.

Diana: Cattle.

Sarah: Yes. So Juanita's daughter Rebecca came too, so the first day it was just the four of us. Later Landon McPhail helped and the Miracle family did as well.

Diana: Did you have any townspeople coming in and helping?

Sarah: Not at that point, no. Soon after, the Red Cross was contacted and the decision was made for us to open up the school for all the firemen coming in.

Diana: So on Tuesday you made sandwiches for lunch. Did you make something different for the evening meal?

Sarah: We did. I think we made corn dogs, it was whatever we had in the freezer because the next week was spring break. So I knew that using all the stuff that we could was going to be fine, without having to get an order in. I knew we had corn dogs and we had some potato chips leftover. I can't remember everything; I should have brought my notepad with me. I had it all written down because I had to figure out how much money we spent, after it all.

Diana: So on that first day, it was just your kitchen staff. Not a whole bunch of other people coming in?

Sarah: Yes.

Diana: Were there other teachers or staff at the school that came up and helped? Students?

Sarah: The maintenance crew came up and the Miracles came up, the whole family. They stayed the whole time because they were the main point of contact for all the firemen when they came in. Mr. Wettig was there full time, he slept up there every night. I'm trying to think who else. As far as the whole time of us being open, that was it. Just like Ann, there were teachers that would have helped but couldn't because they were suffering with whatever, you know, they had their own issues with cattle and fencing.

Diana: So did Kurt go out and help the Kriers with their stuff?

Sarah: Yes, he did. He spent a couple of days out there.

Diana: Were they on fire on Tuesday?

Sarah: I know that Tuesday was the day that we came back. I'm sorry. We lived in Englewood for a while and he worked on Jeff's Englewood ranch. I don't think it was still on fire on Tuesday. A lot of it's a blur.

Diana: So what kind of hours did you spend up at the school? Were you there for all three meals?

Sarah: Yes. We'd go in at 5:30 in the morning and leave at 10:00 at night, even after other people came in because it was our kitchen. We wanted to be there at all times to make sure everything was smooth.

Diana: Was there somebody there throughout the evening, I mean at night?

Sarah: No, we would close up the kitchen, but we left several carafes of coffee out there for the nighttime firemen and crockpots full of food and warmers. I mean, they had a meal to eat when they came in whether we were there to serve it to them or not. So we always made sure the kitchen was available 24/7.

Diana: So what kind of things did you make for breakfast?

Sarah: Oh, we did biscuits and gravy. We had pancakes on a stick. You know, we used whatever we had. I think the grocery store donated stuff to us, biscuits and gravy packets. I know they donated other things; I just can't think right now, but they were really good to us.

Diana: So I heard someone made a Mexican meal one evening.

Yes. We were not a part of making that, but we were there to help serve it.

Diana: Do you remember what they made? Was it enchiladas or tacos?

Sarah: No, I remember them heating up the tortillas. I think it was tacos and you know we wouldn't just feed the firemen. It was the public coming in to eat and then we'd also do to-go orders for the ranchers that were out working and had people working for them. So we were serving 600 plus meals a day, total, I would say. That doesn't include the ones we delivered out.

Diana: And you also delivered some food to the firehouse?

Sarah: Yes. We did that, I think, twice because, after the second time, we were like, "We don't need anything else. Please don't bring us any more food." So yes, I think we delivered food to them twice that was the corn dogs. It was the first couple days that it was just us.

Diana: Up at the school, did you have people that came in and helped you clean or serve meals?

Sarah: Yes. I think by day three, I think by Thursday, we had people volunteering to come in. They ended up with so many people volunteering that they had to go through the office and sign up for certain times to come in. Even some of the high school boys came up, the high school basketball team came up there and helped out. There are three ladies that stand out in my mind that were there and they would make me go away for a little while. You know, like, "Go sit down Sarah, go eat something." It's was amazing the help that they brought. Then people started making desserts and stuff and bringing them up or asking, "What can we make to bring up here? What can we help you with?" So as sad as the time was, it was a pretty amazing experience to be a part of.

Diana: Did you meet lots of people that you didn't know lived in town?

Sarah: Yeah, I met a lot of people that I've seen before, but I never talked to them. Still, after spending a couple of days together, I don't remember all their names, but they have my phone number and I have theirs.

Diana: Just in case you need to get in touch again. So how many days did you serve meals at the school for people? Do you have an idea?

Sarah: Seven. Well, on the seventh day it was just breakfast because the firemen were leaving that day, on that Monday.

Diana: Then did you have a lot of... did it take a while to clean up the kitchen, to clean up everything to make it ready for the week after spring break?

Sarah: That wasn't the biggest cleanup because the firemen weren't in there, you know, cleaning up the soot from the benches in the cafeteria and mopping the floors and having to change out your mop water after every swipe. I think that was the biggest part; our kitchen was not the biggest cleanup.

Diana: So how long did it take you to clean up the cafeteria? And what did you find worked the best?

Sarah: We did it after every meal, that way you wanted to keep it clean! We cleaned after every meal, but it was just scrubbing the benches and the tops of the tables where they set their elbows or whatever. That was the biggest spot to clean, and the soot off their boots. The maintenance crew came in and mopped, and we just cleaned the tables off, just scrubbing them.

Diana: So did the firefighters help clean in their downtime?

Sarah: Oh yes. There was this there was one crew in particular, they were from near Denver, Colorado, I can't remember what town. But they would help mop the hallways and they would tell the maintenance guys, "Let me do this, let me help you." They were very helpful and on the last day, they served us breakfast after we served them, which was really cool. They played basketball with the kids that were up there the whole time. Rebecca's daughter was there the whole time that she was there too. So every time Rebecca came up, she came up to help. They'd play basketball with them, play cards with the kids. They all told us, "This is the most hospitable town we've ever been to." And a lot of them, this is what they do. They travel around helping fire departments, that's what they do. There wasn't one of them that didn't say that to us. So that made us feel proud of how we handled it.

Diana: So when it was time to go back to school, was that kind of a surreal feeling?

Sarah: Yeah it was. You know, thankfully we still had our spring break. We still got that week off afterward.

Diana: Did that help kind of ease back into the next week then?

Sarah: I think it did. I really do. We weren't affected personally, Kurt and I weren't, but you know his family and just the community, hearing all the stories the week coming back into school. The devastation, there was stuff we didn't know. So I think that kind of made it last or linger a little bit longer. But I think we were more prepared to go back to school since we had the week off instead of doing it immediately.

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

Sarah: Of the actual fire itself? I think when we tried to come back.

Diana: And that wall of black?

Sarah: It was so scary. I was so scared. I think I threatened Kurt within an inch of his life and he didn't turn around. Because you know, tires are made of rubber, not metal, not steel.

Diana: Have you grown up in an area where there have been grass fires and wildfires before? Or is this kind of your first experience with a grassfire?

Sarah: My first experience; I guess I didn't realize how fast they can move. I mean, you know fire is dangerous, but you don't think how quickly it can just consume something. You don't ever think about it.

Diana: Because you're not used to it.

Sarah: No, I mean I've been around tornadoes and seen the devastation from that but the devastation from this fire, really, it's something that you can't explain to people.

Diana: So when kids here come through the lunch line, did they talk about it?

Sarah: Some of them would, the ones most affected, I think, are the ones that were most willing to talk about it.

Diana: Did you have some of the kids that lost their houses helping up at the kitchen at the cafeteria with the firefighters after the fire?

Sarah: No. We didn't have any of the kids that lost their houses come up there. I know the First Christian Church group had a few dinners and then they took over the church camp. So I'm sure that Janae Wilson's girls helped that entity.

Diana: They were there. So did you go volunteer down at the camp?

Sarah: I didn't.

Diana: Did you meet any of those volunteers or were you mostly in with the firefighters? Did you meet some of the volunteers that came with hay?

Sarah: We met all the people that brought all the food and stuff because they brought them up to the high school. We didn't know where to tell them to go. So we did meet all the people that came with that stuff.

Diana: So what kind of things were donated?

Sarah: Oh man, everything. There was water, Gatorade, pop, toilet paper or paper towels, deodorant, toiletries, food, any kind of food you could want. At one point, we put it all on the stage in the cafeteria. We ran out of room real quick there. So we moved the water and the Gatorade to the back of the cafeteria against the wall and it was probably about six feet tall. Two cases, you know two rows in. So we had a lot. They actually had to move some of the water out to the shop because we were getting pallets of it at that point. So we moved all the food and stuff out into the hallway and tried to sort it by what it was. That way people could come in and kind of shop.

Diana: Did you use that to make meals?

Sarah: We did use a little bit of it. I know like the canned corn, we used that. We used some macaroni and cheese boxes at one point, some pancake mix. But we wouldn't take all that there was. If there was an overabundance, that's when we would. You know, spaghetti sauce, spaghetti noodles. We made spaghetti one night because the firemen were requesting it. So we did take a little bit of it to help out.

Diana: Did you make a lot of high carb meals for them?

Sarah: We tried to. We just worked with whatever we had. I had to figure out what to make the kids the first couple days back into school because we had run out of so much stuff that we didn't have anything left to feed

them. So I can't remember what we had for them when they came back in. You know, my vendor didn't deliver until Wednesday. But the kids understood; they were nice enough to be understanding.

Diana: So who were some of the people or agencies that helped most through the fire with what you were doing or that you heard about?

Sarah: Fireman-wise?

Diana: Anything.

Sarah: I know there were probably 12 different firefighter units there. I know at one point there was over 120 of them staying at night, some of them sleeping outside. The ones I remember most are the firemen. They sent us footies recently; I should have brought it with me! Tyson came up. They donated some beef and chicken, and they actually donated their services. One I think Friday night they cooked, then they left their grill and a big trailer of meat because they donated it for the whole town and everybody that lost stuff. We did use some of that once they left it there. We use some of that to cook with.

Diana: And they used some of that down at the camp, too?

Sarah: I did ask if I was needed down there. You asked me if I volunteered earlier. I just wanted you to know that I tried.

Diana: I think they were overwhelmed with help, too.

Sarah: Yeah, and I think working 5:30 to 10, I say working, "volunteering," for seven days straight. Once that was over like even Monday, we had a big group picture with the firemen, and they all started leaving and then we were all just kind of like, "Okay, what do we do now?" We were just ready to fall out at that point.

So I think once I got home and didn't have to be anywhere. I didn't feel like I was needed and I think I just kind of fell out for a couple of days.

Diana: Caught back up on stuff. So for you, what effect did the fire have? Was it more of a physical, emotional, or financial? Evidently, you were pretty drained.

Sarah: Yes, for sure it was physically draining, but was pretty emotional too. You know, being there when people came in that needed the donations and just the devastation on their faces and also hearing their stories and people I didn't even know I was hugging and crying with them. So I think a little bit of both. And honestly, the deprivation of sleep that I had because I'd go home and think about it. So did I really sleep from 10 p.m. to 5:30 a.m.? No, I did not.

Diana: So what do you do with your son during this time?

Sarah: He went to Garden City with his grandma and grandpa. They came and picked him up on Tuesday.

Sarah: So he was out through the fire. Then was he gone through spring break too? Or did he come back that week.

Sarah: He was gone through spring break in case I was needed anywhere else or anything else happened. He was up at the school when the firemen first started showing up and then his grandma came to pick them up.

Diana: It's good to have back-up. Can you perceive of anything positive that came from the fire?



Sarah: I think that we're better prepared for it happening again. I think that seeing the community come together was a pretty big deal for a lot of people. I just think that's about it.

Diana: Did you learn some more efficient ways to serve food up at the school?

Sarah: No.

Diana: You kind of have a small kitchen.

Sarah: I can only have so many people, so it's not always "the more the merrier" though either. You can get too many people in the kitchen, but it's definitely helpful that we had worked together for, not a full year, but we're like a well-oiled machine up there. We don't have to talk to get stuff done. No one has to direct. I've never had to, so there wouldn't be a quicker way.

Diana: So what have you done or are you planning on doing to prepare for another fire or emergency, personally?

Sarah: Well, my pictures are ready to go in my car. I can tell you that I was I was beyond devastation. We were sitting at the Dollar General in Coldwater when I thought about the fact that I had forgotten my pictures. We were seeing things on Facebook and getting text messages about how the school was on fire and half the town was gone. That's what people were saying.

Diana: Right.

Sarah: I was just thinking, "All those memories are gone now."

Diana: So what about that community? What can they do to prepare or make plans for another emergency? Or have we?

Sarah: I'm not sure. I think that from what I understand, the schools were not let out at the same time. Now I don't know if that's 100% true, but I'm sure it is, though. The schools were not out at the same time. There is a text-messaging thing that they do to contact parents when school's letting out early. I think if that had been used, it would have been a smoother process of getting kids home to their parents. I think that could have been helped.

I think the emergency management is a lot better prepared than what they were. I had conversations with Millie Fudge and Mr. Wettig together at a certain point. I think it was on Friday when Tyson was there. We were sitting around talking. I think they could have been better prepared for it. I mean, we've not had a fire of this magnitude ever in this area. So I don't know, can you really prepare yourself more? You know, unless that happens again, that's the only way you'll know.

Diana: Would you have evacuated if the policemen hadn't come by and told you to leave?

Sarah: Probably not. We probably would have stayed. Honestly, in hindsight, Kurt and I were talking, and he wouldn't have gone. You know, not just because of all our stuff, but because his grandfather and Jeff live on the west side of town and probably could have used him. He fights with himself about that. He feels bad.

Diana: Did they lose pasture and fencing in the fire out at the ranch?

Sarah: Jeff and Katrina did at their Englewood ranch and their Bucklin ranch.

Diana: So did you guys go out and help them roll up fence and fix fence or anything?

Sarah: No, we offered.

Diana: Did they have a lot of volunteers?

Sarah: They had a ton of people helping them. We did though because at one point we delivered supplies down to Englewood. We took some water and stuff for the firemen down there. Lorri Kay was kind of the head of the service that donated stuff that they needed down there. So she just contacted us and we loaded up her suburban from the high school. Mr. Endicott and Deb Pearce and us, we all went down there and we just kind of drove around to see what had happened.

Diana: Did you go with Deb when she went and delivered water out around the county?

Sarah: No.

Diana: That was just Wettig and Endicott that went with her then? Did they have donated food supplies down in Englewood?

Sarah: Yes.

Diana: Did you bring them some extra or did you just add it onto that?

Sarah: Yes, we took several boxes of food and toilet paper and paper towels and bottles of water and stuff like that. Yes, that was all that we took down there. I know Deb and Mr. Endicott had their school vans full of that, too.

Diana: So doing that and going out and seeing what the fire had done and coming back from Medicine Lodge, what were some of your emotional feelings? What did you think?

Sarah: I videoed all the way back from Medicine Lodge. As soon as we saw the fire, I took video the whole way home. It was just amazing how that much devastation happened and nobody was caught in it to the point where they died. You know, aside from the semi-truck driver, I think he was just smoke inhalation. It just blew my mind that nobody else was hurt.

Diana: Was there a contrast between east of Ashland and down at Englewood, or was it just all black?

Sarah: Yes, down by Englewood, on the way down because we took Angle Road there and it was black. Then we took the highway, we came out onto 283. We took 283 back and along 283 it was like sand dunes. All the trees were just gone. There was nothing standing. It was completely different. It was sandy over here.

Diana: Have you been out there now?

Sarah: We've not been out there since we first went down. But we used to live down there when we first moved here. We drove by that house and the fire almost reached the back porch of our old house.

Diana: And they stopped it or it stopped. It is actually hard to tell.

Sarah: Yes, it was pretty amazing to see. We went down by the ranch and everything was gone down there. I don't know if you talked to Katrina, but they lost a lot on both their ranches.

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

Sarah: Like I said, as devastating as it was, it was one of the most awesome experiences I've ever been through. You know, volunteering and seeing all the volunteers that came in, all the firemen and all the townspeople and everything.

Diana: It was kind of amazing.