

Melanie Hink

Diana: Today is March 7th, 2018.

Melanie: What is your name?

Diana: Melanie Hink.

Diana: And where do you live?

Melanie: In Ashland, Kansas.

Diana: What is your occupation?

Melanie: I own Expressions, it's a floral shop.

Diana: And how old are you?

Melanie: I am 60 years old.

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

Melanie: On that day, we heard on the scanner that Englewood was being evacuated.

Diana: Where were you?

Melanie: We were both at home. I had asked Bill to go unlock the Christian Church, and we would let everybody know that it was available to come to there and we would take care of them. So he left the house to go unlock the church. In the meantime, it came over the scanner that we were being evacuated. So I called him back to the house. We acted like crazy people? You know, grab this grab that, and then we got in the car.

Diana: And where did you go?

Melanie: We went as far as the state building out to the east of town. We sat there because I was oblivious. I didn't think it was ever going to get in town. All the cars kept going by and kept going by. So we decided to go ahead and go to Protection. We went to Protection and sat at the Quick Stop right there on the highway until it got pure black there. Then we thought, "This is for real." Then we continued to Coldwater.

Diana: So had Protection been evacuated by the time you stopped there?

Melanie: When we sat there for a few minutes, they evacuated them too.

Diana: When you got to Coldwater, where did you go?

Melanie: At the gas pumps, we just sat in a circle with a whole bunch of us there. Matt and Janae Wilson and Kris and Jesicka Wilkinson and Ryan Renshaw and Martha Williamson and Carla Filson, Mike and Rita Frelove, and us. We all just sat in a circle, just like that. That's basically where we stayed.

Diana: Did you go eat.

Melanie: No, we had snacks. We just ate snacks! No, we didn't go eat. We called to get a pizza and they said it was going to be about a two and a half hour wait. So we just had some snackie stuff.

Diana: You didn't ever go up to the school?

Melanie: We didn't go up to the school. No, Bill had just gotten over that respiratory stuff. So we didn't want to be in a big crowd. We just stayed in the car all night and talked to our son.

Diana: And you stayed in Coldwater all night? Did you get pretty cold?

Melanie: We like to froze to death because Martha didn't have anything. She had a sweatshirt, so I gave her my blanket. Jes Wilkinson, she didn't have anything but a short sleeve shirt, so I gave her my hoodie. I rummaged and found my coat in the car. It still did get really, really cold.

Diana: So when you were sitting there, were you facing west and you could see the smoke coming in? Did it get darker or better?

Melanie: You couldn't really see anything. We just talked to Dusty, our son, half the night on and off because he made his way in from Liberal Jenny was here. She had come to help her grandma that day and she got trapped here. Of course, the fire was out there by Jeff and Sheryl's and Jim and Jo's, and he was determined he was going to get here. So Gus and he came the back way and snuck into town. He stayed in town because by then Jess Bates and Ethan (all of that transpired out there on the highway) with them in the wreck and everything. Ethan was so scared because at their house he could see the fire. And so they went to Teresa and Terry's house. Dusty promised him he would stay up all night and watch for fire. He did call them several times if something popped up. Him and Kristi were like patrolling the town and he called us in the middle of the night. You know, it was like 2 or 3 in the morning, we talked for a while and he'd go check something.

Diana: So what kind of things did he tell you he was seeing?

Melanie: Just fire, all the way around. I'd say, go check down at... because Kristi said if it ever got in the creek bed, we were in trouble. He kept a really close eye on that because he knew they were all busy fighting fires. So between him and Kristi, I don't know, we probably got 20 phone calls that night during the night. Just checking on us, which we were fine. We were just checking on them.

Diana: Did you get any sleep?

Melanie: No.

Diana: So when did you decide it was safe enough to return?

Melanie: Well, as soon as the Quick Stop opened, I think they opened at six, we all, the Judge and Rita and Bill and I headed for the coffee pot. As soon as that cafe opened, we went there and ate breakfast. And that's when they said we could go back home. So it was fairly early. Then we decided to head back home.

Diana: So what kind of things did you see on the way home or not see?

Melanie: A lot of burnt.

Diana: What shocked you the most?

Melanie: I think when I got to Matt and Janae's house and it was completely gone. Because we were with them most of the evening until they went. They had pulled their camper over there. Thank God they had that. We went and sat with them for a while and I think seeing their cement slab, because that's what it was; basically, I think that really hit home right then. The landmarks that you ordinarily saw were gone, but when you spend the night with somebody that is very, very close to you, they had nothing. I mean they had what they had with them.

Diana: Were they still behind you?

Melanie: They had the camper still at Coldwater. We parked somewhere and they pulled it into somebody's lot over there. I can't remember.

Diana: It was Kenna Jackson's.

Melanie: Yes, that's who it was. I had talked to Judge, while we were eating breakfast, about opening the church. We left soon after breakfast and got home just as soon as we could, but we didn't meet up with them till later that evening.

Diana: So this is Tuesday, when you're getting back. Did you go find supplies to open the church? What were your plans at the church?

Melanie: Well, we didn't really have a plan, but we knew that we had members of our church family, like Matt, Janae and the girls and Carol and Dave Bouziden. Rhett's a member of the church and Carol attends church quite often. Just community in general, I felt like we needed to open the church. Judge and I talked about it; we're both on the board. We just felt like we needed to take care of them. That was something we could do to give them a place to come and visit and know that each other are okay, feed them, and just kind of take care of them.

Diana: So did you have a meal for supper?

Melanie: We did, we had sloppy joes that night.

Diana: Did you have a lot of other people besides church family come by?

Melanie: Oh yes. We had firefighters, we just opened the door. We didn't care who it was. It was full.

Diana: Did you run out of food?

Melanie: No, we never run out of food. I've never run out of food for anything. I always cook way too much.

Diana: Do you have an idea of how many people you fed that night?

Melanie: Oh, Gosh, I'd say we fed a hundred that night, I suppose.

Diana: Did you have enough volunteers to help?

Melanie: Oh, yes. The kitchen was full. We just put it out and they all came. I had a lot of kids come volunteer. Gus was here and Andrew Endicott and Jackie and Luis. I had a lot of kids. I was very pleased with that. They all wanted to help.

Diana: So the next day, did you make breakfast and make three meals?

Melanie: I think we did breakfast burritos that next morning. Then we did more evening meals. If we needed to do sack lunches, we did some of those too. I think that next day we made... (I should have done this before a year passed.) I can't remember if it was that morning or Friday. We made 650 burritos on Friday and distributed them on that Saturday. I remember that, but we did evening meals. We did spaghetti one night, I can't remember what we did the next night, but we were outgrowing the basement, the kitchen. We needed more room, but I remember that Saturday, we divided up and everybody went just different directions and took hot burritos out to all of the ranchers and people that were working. There were still firefighters here and we took them up to the firehouse. We made 650 burritos that morning.

Diana: So during the week, there were several of your church members that were ranchers that had lost

everything, so they didn't really get a chance to come to town. They might not have had electricity. Did someone in your church deliver meals out for lunch?

Melanie: We did. We took meals out more than once to different places.

Diana: So were there hot meals or were they just mainly sandwiches?

Melanie: We didn't do the sandwich thing until we moved down to the camp. If they had something, they had something hot.

Diana: So give some idea of what type of things you made.

Melanie: I think we did hamburgers, but mostly we did a hot meal at night. We made sure they had a good breakfast. We had biscuits and sausage gravy one morning and we had breakfast casserole one morning. Usually, everybody was so busy at lunchtime they either came to Nina's or Nina was putting out a lot of to-go orders, I remember that. I talked to Laurie Kennedy and asked her about using the Hardesty House because we were just... It was getting too big and growing too much. She said, "Yes, definitely."

So we moved our operation to the kitchen at the Hardesty House, the kitchen just wasn't equipped anymore. We did that for, I think, a week and finally I was, "We've got to go get the camp cleaned up and get moved down there," because I know that kitchen; Rock knew that kitchen. We knew we could put out the meals there. We had been broken into in December out there and they just ransacked the whole kitchen and the mess hall, so we all gathered up and went down and cleaned and got ready and we started down there then and opened the camp up.

Diana: So this is the camp now owned by the church here?

Melanie: We have a board of directors. It is a Christian Church Camp. We're two different entities.

Diana: So the church is its own and the camp is its own. You have separate boards?

Melanie: Yes, separate boards; I'm on both boards.

Diana: So like two weeks after the fire is about when you started that down at the camp?

Melanie: Yes.

Diana: And you also opened the dormitories up for people?

Melanie: We opened up both bunkhouses. It was cold!

Diana: What kind of arrangements did you make for people? Did they have to bring their own bedding or did you have some?

Melanie: Yes, they brought their bedding. How that started was, Holly Fast and Kim Hazen took calls from people wanting to help. People were to call them and make the arrangements, then they told us how many people, and they kept track of how many people were coming and how long they intended on staying and that kind of thing. What we did was make sure the bunkhouse was clean, the shower stalls, the bathroom facility and everything. Then we fed them.

Diana: So did you have separate crews to make sure that the bunkhouses were ready and the kitchen was ready, or did you have the same people doing it?

Melanie: It just depended on who could get loose to do whatever. Rock Hill was extremely important on the maintenance part of things. I mean, that's an old camp that's 74 years old. So you know, the plumbing was

taxed majorly and something was always backing up.

Diana: You haven't had those camps full for a while, right?

Melanie: We have camp every year, but you don't have two hundred people at a time staying there, you know.

Diana: So how long was the camp open?

Melanie: The first week of June we officially closed because we had camp the end of June. We had a few people stay that first week in June and then we shut down to get ready for camp.

Diana: So down there, if your bunkhouses got full, where did you put people?

Melanie: We have what we call the "cook shack". We could house several over there; it's in the back of our shop. We also had the Red Cross cots that we put over in the chapel. There were quite a few cots over there. One weekend, we were full to capacity. I mean, we couldn't have put anybody anywhere else, except maybe hang them on a nail.

Diana: Did you have any sleeping trailers?

Melanie: There were two that they brought in. One of them was a shower trailer, and one was for an individual group that came and brought their trailer. In fact, it's still sitting up there on the highway!

Diana: But one that came was a shower trailer? Did it have stalls or something? Did you go look?

Melanie: I never went in there; I don't know. I just know that it was a shower place. They could take a shower.

Diana: Did it come in handy?

Melanie: Honestly, I was in the kitchen. That wasn't my department. Mine was, "Feed them," and I can't really tell you that one, I don't know.

Diana: I just thought of that. I knew they had that but didn't know how that worked. So how did you figure out what kind of meal to make? Did you have a crew that was... Did you plan the meals or did you have somebody help plan the meals?

Melanie: Basically, Rock and I, at the beginning, we would fix things that were easy and we could fix large quantities of and knew that it would hold. People would sit down and eat; it didn't take them long to eat because most of them were exhausted by the time they got in. At the beginning, that first week, our church paid for the food and supplies. Then people started donating for the meals. We had a card at the grocery store that people were able to put money on and we could go to the store. We had so much food brought in and donated that it was unreal. It just was unbelievable.

Diana: Did you get a lot of desserts?

Melanie: We had desserts, we often had Hurt's doughnuts from Wichita. We had a Ness City 4-H group come down. Robin Swonger brought her 4-H kids, and I think they all brought two or three desserts each. We had dessert everywhere. They stayed; they did a meal on Friday evening. They stayed and did the meal and we took a break that night. I think I had a wedding or something. The Methodist girls came in and worked Saturday and gave us a break.

I literally shut my flower shop down; there wasn't anything going on. I felt like I was better needed doing something like cooking than sitting and twiddling my thumbs. So I just closed the door and put a sign up. If

somebody needed something, I'd go take care of it. I just felt like I needed to be down there.

Diana: So did you have any trouble getting volunteers to help with the different meals?

Melanie: No.

Diana: Did you have a good cleanup crew too?

Melanie: Very good.

Diana: Were most of the people that helped with the meals local people or did they come from surrounding towns?

Melanie: I had some from Protection. I had Carla Filson a lot. Brenda Mills came over, even though she about lost everything. She came over a couple times and helped. A lot of Ashland people, Jenny and Dusty came over a lot. The biggest night we had, we served 225 people. I bribed Dusty and he smoked pork loin for us. We served smoked pulled pork sandwiches, potato salad, and baked beans and we served 225 people that night.

Diana: Is that the night you invited the firefighters, the local firemen?

Melanie: I think so. It's all a blur. But I think that is the same night, yes.

Diana: So most of these people that came and volunteered, did they have the essential utensils-- gloves and stuff-- that they needed to actually go do some of the things that they were having to go out and do?. Did they have gloves or tools?

Melanie: We had an abundance of things dropped off at the camp. Once they cleaned out the school and it went to city hall, they started dropping supplies off at the camp. At one time, we had stuff everywhere. We moved it all to the chapel and that was full, but we set it up at the front of the mess hall, the gloves and the snacks and the first aid things they needed. We had boxes of T-shirts, clothes and bedding. You name it and it was there. You couldn't have wanted for much of anything. We had essential oils. We had everything. It was unreal.

Diana: Were people pretty dirty by the time they came back for supper?

Melanie: They were black with soot.

Diana: So did that clog up your plumbing too?

Melanie: Not so much that, it was just the constant use of the showers and stuff. They learned real quick to give it a little bit and let it catch up. Nobody complained. We hated it because we don't have heat and air. You know the air [conditioning] is water coolers in the bunkhouse. At the time, we didn't have heat and air in the mess hall, so it was cold. It was just flat cold. Rock went and gathered every heater, everything we could find to keep them warm. And I know there was a couple of nights it got really cold. We bought every ounce of kerosene there was in Clark County and Comanche County, trying to keep them warm. It wasn't terrible. It wasn't the most comfortable situation for some nights, especially when it rained all that time. It got so cold, even in the mess hall. I just turned all the big ovens on and opened the doors and put a fan up on my counter and blew some of the warm out. It helped a little bit. But they were all gracious. I mean it was just it was so humbling, very humbling.

Diana: So by the time you closed the camp, were most of the donations pretty much gone or was there still quite a bit left?

Melanie: We still had some. We had a gentleman from, I can't think of the name of it. He has a barbecue

place and he brought...I went over to Bison and bought a new freezer because he filled it with barbecue and tuna casseroles and he brought a lot. I went over to Bison and bought a new freezer and he filled it with brisket, ribs, pulled pork, tuna casseroles (because it was during Lent), rolls and all kinds of fresh salad stuff. It was unreal.

We still had a little bit of that left. There was some hamburger left. But as far as fresh stuff, we had pretty much gone through everything. There was a group that came, oh, maybe September or October, that went to Englewood and worked. So I gave the leftover barbeque to Millie and she used up the rest of it. So it's all gone now. It's all been used.

Diana: So who made meals after you closed the camp? Did somebody else start making them or did people bring their own cooks with them? I know the Amish brought their cooks.

Melanie: We had camp and then I think we opened it back up for a little bit. There was some of them went to Englewood and stayed over there. That was that group that took their own cooks over there and everything. We had a couple more groups that came after camp. They were just kind of on their own because it was time for me to get back to work and everything. We basically cooked for two and a half months.

Diana: So is the camp better off now? Did you get some donations that helped to do renovations?

Melanie: We did get some nice donations. We did upgrade, we put heat and air in, which we were going to do anyway. The sheriff's department had given us a nice donation to be able to do that, but we were able to do a few other upgrades. We're getting ready to put new siding on the girls' bunkhouse.

Yes, it taxed the plumbing and everything greatly, but would we do it again? In a heartbeat. You know, we had to dig it out the sewer more than once, and have it fixed and whatever. There was a leak here and a leak there. We met so many nice people; it was just unbelievable.

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

Melanie: Just the black. Honestly, when we left here, in my heart, I just felt like it wasn't going to get into town. That part did not scare me. But just seeing the smoke and worrying about people, you know, everything was black. I mean, the stairs at the church were black. We have white tables, and they'd leave and it was just black. I think that stuck in my head more than anything.

Diana: Did you have a hard time getting the tables clean? Carpets?

Melanie: No, they cleaned up really quick.

Diana: So you've lived in the western part of Kansas or Texas most of your life.

Melanie: All my life.

Diana: So you've seen grass fires before and how they act. How did this one act differently?

Melanie: This one had no intention of stopping. Most of the time, you can get it under control in a few hours. This one was on a vengeance. It had no intention of stopping. I worried about all our guys. I worried about them greatly because I know some of them are getting up there like me! I grew up with two of them and I worried about them and I worried about Bill; I just kept thinking about them. I knew they were not taking care of themselves. I think that worried me more than anything because I just know them. They won't stop. They don't. I was really concerned about all of them.

Diana: So did you have an emotional response to the fire?

Melanie: Yes, the only time I cried was when I saw Charlie Gibson. She looked at me and I had big old tears and she said, "Quit it." She said, "Don't cry. We're okay." And you know, when I saw their place gone, I cried. Then I just made myself so busy.

Diana: Did you think all of the people that helped down at the camp and like them that lost their house and stuff, do you think that was some kind of like a counseling session that helped them cope and helped everybody cope with what happened?

Melanie: Say a farmer or rancher came in and their crew they had that day or that weekend or whatever they'd come and they'd eat together and they'd just sit there and visit. Because it got dark early, they'd visit for a couple hours after they got done eating and everything. It was mostly, "Where were you when it started? What were you doing?" I'd say we were major counseling center down there.

I saw people cry, people that were mad, you know, "Why us?" Well, you can't do that.

Diana: Stages of grief?

Melanie: Yes, grief, denial. I would say we were a major counseling place. We had so many people come in that had experienced other tragedies. We had one lady that been through a bad tornado. She lost everything, and she just said, "It'll get better. It'll get better." There were people were from back east. I wondered, what did they know about Kansas? What did they know about farming and ranching or our everyday life? But I was shocked. I had a gal from New York City and she came by herself. She flew into Wichita, rented a car, and drove out here. I literally went, "What?!? What does she know?" Well, her name was Betsy Hicks. And oh dear. I'd put her up against anybody working. She has her own ranch. She raises cattle and she was not afraid to work. She kicked in and she stayed a whole week while her husband stayed back in New York. Since then, we've stayed in touch and visited and we Facebook each other quite often.

Diana: So did a lot of people, if they could, stay a long time?

Melanie: We had several that stayed. We had one couple that stayed like three weeks.

Diana: They had their own mobile home or something?

Melanie: They had a motorhome. They parked over in one of the places. Most of them stayed three or four days. My group from Ohio, that we have since become very good friends with, they stayed. They got here on a Wednesday night and they stayed till Sunday and then came back. They came in March and then they came back in August or September and worked again and they're coming back. So I hear from them all the time. Sierra's coming back to help at camp!

Diana: So these people usually stopped down there, because that's where the volunteers usually went to meet people that they were going to go help. And since you were there, you probably saw them in the morning or saw them when they first came in.

Melanie: Rock saw them in the morning.

Diana: When they came back at night, did they talk about what they've seen? Were they expecting what they saw?

Melanie: A lot of them were shocked at what they saw. They were just shocked that there was nothing, the dead cattle, no fences, the homes that have burned. They weren't expecting that. They were there to build fence, but they didn't take into consideration that there may have been 500 head of cattle in that pasture or wherever they were going to build that fence. There was a lot of emotions. I usually didn't do mornings unless Rock couldn't be there. He took the morning shift.

Diana: So when did you come in, like noon or afterward?

Melanie: It depended on what we were going to eat. Most of the time, I was down there by 11:00 or so. If they needed a sack lunch or something, we'd get their sack lunches ready and somebody would pick them up. If we knew the night before, they would be in the walk-in ready to go.

Diana: Did a lot of people bring their own lunch?

Melanie: Oh some did, some brought. Kim and Holly told them that we would supply the breakfast and the evening meal if they wanted. But we had so much lunch meat and chips and stuff; we could have made sandwiches forever.

Diana: So who were some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful?

Melanie: Well, I'd say first and foremost our church, the First Christian Church of Ashland.

Diana: Did you keep in contact with the board most of the time?

Melanie: Yes, if they wanted me, they knew where I was.

Diana: You didn't have to clear anything through them first?

Melanie: No, we just talked. We didn't even have a board meeting or anything. We just kind of called each other. Judge Mike Freelove, was the president of the board and we just got on the phone and said, "Do you have a problem with this?" And everyone was like, "No. What do we need to do?" . Most of them were there at some point rotating in and out. The grocery store was huge, getting something in or keeping the supplies.

Diana: Did they bring you stuff?

Melanie: No, we usually went and picked it up. They would have if we'd needed it. I'd ask Heather, if we had something planned, and she was really good about having it or ordering biscuits or whatever we needed.

Diana: Did you always have enough money on the card?

Melanie: We had an abundance of money on the card. There at the end, they were eating pretty good because we were getting ready to shut down. We felt like it had been donated and you needed to use it. I think she turned the rest of it over to the community foundation, what wasn't used. It was unreal. We had one gentleman that kept calling and saying, "Have you used it? Do you need money?" "No. We've got plenty. Just wait. Just wait." He'd call in a week and go, "Do you need money?" "No, we're good." It just came in. You didn't have to ask. It was there.

Spotts Lumber. Oh, Lord. I don't know what we'd have done without them. Joe, Jeremy and Sue was huge too. We'd ask and it was there. I mean, if they didn't have it, it was ordered and there two days later. They kept the kerosene coming in.

Diana: Is that kind of hard to come by?

Melanie: Well, they don't keep an abundance in stock. They let us borrow heaters, even out of their own houses, their garages or whatever. Our electric bill was paid by another church and just the graciousness was overwhelming. It truly was, because I was worried about what the electric bill was going to be. You know, with all the lights on, all the water, and all the electric heaters running and everything. Then I get the electric bill and it's zeroed out. And I thought, "Well, Kristi messed that up." I called her and she said, "No, no, no. It was paid." I'm like, "Are you serious?" So she goes, "Yes, I'm serious." Oh, my God, that brought tears to my eyes.

Diana: Yes, I would imagine. So was there any physical or financial or emotional effect from the fire caused

to you personally?

Melanie: Emotional. Yes, I think I've cried more since it was over. You know, teared up like reading Facebook posts from yesterday. One little gal lost her home. I mean, I've never seen her cry; I've never seen her shed a tear, which makes me just think, "Oh, you big baby." And she goes, "No, we're all alive. We're here. We didn't lose anyone." Emotionally, that's, you think back and did that really happen? Yeah. You can still see the effects of it.

Financially? Yes. I closed the shop. That's what my heart told me to do. And you know, you will reap benefits somewhere else, which I did. Meeting all those wonderful people that I met. I wouldn't have met them had I not been down there. If I had been sitting on the south end of Main Street, I wouldn't have met these people that I had the pleasure of meeting. Just wow. It just makes you stop to think; there are good people. There are so many good people and that outweighs the bad that our country goes through. People could see truck after truck after truck go by full of hay. Here Jeff shows up with a big old truckload of stuff, going, "I don't know where we're going to put this!"

Diana: They not only sent hay, but they also sent food donations and other things.

Melanie: Food and paper supplies and clothing. Brand-new clothing, gloves, hats, you name it, we had it.

Diana: Did some of the volunteers come without proper clothing?

Melanie: We had some. The gloves were a major thing. They may have had a pair of gloves, but they had a pair of cotton gloves. They didn't have good leather gloves to work with the barbed wire. We had thousands of pairs of gloves.

Diana: So did it get cold and they needed a different coat or something?

Melanie: We had some coats; we had some long underwear. We had those heating things you put in your gloves. Overboots, we had boxes of rubber boots and covers for boots. I just stop and think about what all was out there. It's just unbelievable.

Diana: Did anybody take a record of what was donated?

Melanie: There was not enough time for that. Debbie Trahern could probably tell you more than anybody what was out there. That was not my priority. Mine was food. You know, how many cans of green beans do I need to open or whatever. She kind of kept things cleaned up, up there. She and Paige Hamilton went through and organized different things.

Diana: You had just about everything.

Melanie: Like shampoos, deodorant, toothpaste. We had thousands of toothbrushes out there. I mean thousands of them. You would open this box and there was just a string like that of 50 toothbrushes hooked together. You couldn't have wanted for anything. Unbelievable.

Diana: Can you perceive of anything positive that resulted from the fire?

Melanie: I feel like our community was always close. But I think this brought us closer as a community. I think there were some lifelong friendships made, especially with a rancher and somebody who went and worked for him for a week. There was a bond. I saw that bond several times when it came time for them to go. That's where the tears would come, when they were loading up to leave. They had spent a week working their tails off for somebody, and they had to tell them goodbye because they lived in Minnesota or somewhere like that. I've talked to a lot of people that have stayed in touch with those people. And I think the bond... I think we touched every state, except I don't think we had anybody from Alaska or Hawaii. We had Canada. And I think we did every other state. I wish we would have done a map. We didn't think about

that till later.

But I think we had somebody from... We even had California!

Diana: Didn't the 4-H kids have flags at the parade for most of the states?

Melanie: They didn't have them all.

Diana: And probably did things they'd never done before.

Melanie: Yes, there were some that said, "Oh!"

Diana: Were there any that helped you make meals?

Melanie: Yeah, we had some. I had a gal from Ohio, Danielle Lewis. She brought a bunch of kids out and they were 4-H kids. I think she brought 12 then she would stay during the day. They all shipped out whichever way they were going. They were tearing out fence and she'd stay and help me. We just laughed a lot and I got to know her. There were several that the husbands went out and the wife stayed. They would come in and help.

Diana: So most of the youth that came, were they mostly 4-H, FFA or church groups?

Melanie: There were some church groups, too. There was FFA and a lot of 4-H groups and there were some individual kids.

Diana: And families?

Melanie: There were two brothers that just loaded up and came out. They were like 16 and 18, and they spent a week and a half here just working. So it's amazing, Ashland, Kansas, on a map? I feel like we have a big boast around us, a big old star around us now because now people know where Ashland is. I think it's changed everything, not just the countryside. You know, it used to be you'd be going down a dirt road and they'd say, "Turn at the old barn," or something like that. Well, the barn is gone. So what do you do now? If you've lived here all your life, who know miles? I don't pay attention to that.

Diana: Or the road name.

Melanie: I wouldn't know a road name out here if it hit me on the side of the head. I have no clue. You go to the old Barriclow place and turn south. You know, that's how you got around out there. All in all, it was just an experience.

Diana: So like what you were talking about, what do you miss most of the things that used to be here?

Melanie: I think going out to Dave and Carol's house that's no more. Janae and Matt's house is no more. I think probably that. My heart aches for them. Carol and Dave are in their house; it's beautiful. But to me, it's just not their place. Matt and Janae have actually turned over the dirt and they're getting ready to move on their deal. So I think that just the places that you were used to seeing on a daily basis or, you know, you'd go to Protection and you'd see this, this, and that, and it's not there anymore. Matt put that big cross up there on the hill. They called, and we went out and that was an emotional thing, putting that cross up.

You wouldn't think that, you know, a bunch of burned wire.

Diana: Well, all the things that are part of that.

Melanie: We went out there and spent the afternoon putting that thing up. I think that was a lot of closure that day. You see that every day, so that's a constant reminder of what we all went through and everything. I

thank God every day that we didn't lose anyone because that was close. Like that truck driver. You know that's a sad deal, but the girls behind him could have easily been gone. Jess and Ethan, I think about that and it just makes me sick. Thank God Kay was right behind them, to be able to get them.

Diana: That worked well. So what have you done or can you do to prepare for a future fire or another major event?

Melanie: Well, I made a list of things I need to grab. Because, when we left, I grabbed my purse, his billfold, our medication, a change of clothes, and I put some pictures in a sack. I would probably go about things a little different, grab some paperwork that we would need. I'm not going to live on point, you know, worrying about it. I just put it in God's hands. If that's going to be, it's going to be. I don't care what you do.

Diana: And put stuff where you know it's at so you can grab it quickly?

Melanie: Yes. Yes. And make sure you have gas in your car! I didn't have to go get gas because we had gotten gas earlier in the day. Don't ask me why. Well, my buzzer came on so I went and I got gas. That was the biggest thing I heard, was people were trying to get gas to get out of town.

Diana: And the pump wasn't working or the credit card wouldn't work.

Melanie: And there they were sitting in line. And you know, when they say, "Get out," they mean it. They weren't playing.

Diana: Were you surprised at how well people evacuated? The majority left.

Melanie: I was, I really was. I wasn't oblivious to it; I could see the smoke but I just...

Diana: Were you in denial like Linda?

Melanie: Well, I don't know if it was denial or just faith in God. I don't know. I'm going to go with faith in God, but I just didn't feel like it was going to get into town. Bill was going, "What do you want to do?" And I'm like, "Well, let's inch our way out in case we do need to get out. We're not going to be at home." You know, if they came by house to house, they're going to catch us at home. We went through that several years ago when our backyard caught on fire. We were both sick at the house, and we had no clue our yard was on fire and the hedge next door. We had no clue, and when they said, "Get out!" They weren't kidding. I don't know whether all of the volunteer fire departments are like ours but we have the best and I'm not just saying this. We have the best, best volunteer fire department there is.

I would put them guys up against anybody. They care. They care whether you have a home or you don't and they live and breathe it. I truly believe that's why we didn't lose more than we lost because that's just how they are.

Diana: So what about the community? What can they do or what have we done to prepare for another event?

Melanie: I think everybody is just... they need to pay attention. Water your yard. Water your trees. I don't have to tell my kids because they water. They live out in the country. I'm like, "Make sure you've got that sprinkler where you can hook it up." Just keep your weeds cut down and you know that helps a lot. Mow. Just be prepared.

Diana: So when the fire whistle went off this week, were you...

Melanie: Thank God, I was in Pratt at a doctor's appointment on Monday. I didn't hear it. Jenny and I went to Pratt, so we were up there, but we had massive phone calls. I'm sure everybody had gone over and over and over every detail from the last time and each department probably changed something to make it better.

When we got back to town, they were all at the EMT building, and the firemen were down at the barn. You could see that they were ready. They were ready to go.

Diana: It turned out well. It helps when you have somebody come and help.

Melanie: Like a chopper.

Diana: Yes, so did you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd like to share?

Melanie: I thank everybody that came throughout the whole United States. It was unbelievable. I wish everyone could have experienced what I got to experience with the pickup loads of food coming. They'd back up to the back door and it just kept coming in. And the people, the wonderful people that we all met.

Diana: Did you have any of the firefighters come to the church?

Melanie: Yes.

Diana: The first couple of days. Did they mainly stay at the school?

Melanie: Yes, they were at the school. We had several from Colorado that came and ate. So we had a good group of people coming through. I could not for the life of me figure out where Tom Berryman ate one of my sloppy joes, but he kept going, "I sure could use a sloppy joe." It was there at church! He came and ate with Jerome that night. Finally, I figured it out. But it was just unbelievable, and I will go to my grave saying that. It was just unbelievable the amount of people that a.) showed up and b.) were so generous. You know, just absolutely so. We wouldn't be where we are now had it not been for all of them.