

Jeff Kay

Diane: Today is July 23, 2018. What is your name?

Jeff: Jeff Kay

Diane: And, where do you live?

Jeff: I live in Ashland, Kansas.

Diane: And how old are you?

Jeff: I am 48 years old.

Diane: And what is your occupation?

Jeff: I am the General Manager of Ashland Feed and Seed.

Diane: Okay. When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as the fire?

Jeff: On March 6th of 2017 there was some warnings put out that Ashland needed to evacuate. I knew about the fire at approximately 10:30 a.m. My dad, owner of Ashland Feed and Seed, he took off and went down towards Englewood because we could smell smoke here in Ashland and he related to us because we own a large company here in Ashland, and said there was a fire coming our way.

Diane: So, where were you at the time?

Jeff: I was at the Ashland Feed and Seed.

Diane: Could you see smoke? But you could smell smoke.

Jeff: No. When the fire got close, when the evacuations happened, it was the scariest feeling I ever had. You could see the smoke; I did not evacuate. I stayed here in town due to my business, my home, the place I love called Ashland, Kansas. I was here for it. And I've got a lot of employees that relied on me. It was their job. And I had to be here. I felt like I needed to do what I could to help.

Diane: Part of your business is hay grinding, right? And you have a lot of bales of hay here.

Jeff: We have a lot of hay here. We manufacture alfalfa pellets, so we had on hand that day somewhere around 2,500 bales of alfalfa here at the south end of town.

Diane: Do you have a fire prevention policy?

Jeff: We've got a fire prevention policy, yes. The City of Ashland put a fire hydrant in right by our place of business and the fire department gave us a used 2-inch waterline hose that we had connected and ready if we needed it. But that day, when the fire got closer, you could see the fire trucks around. You could smell the smoke. You could feel the heat, but you couldn't see the fire. You did not have a clue where it was. Nobody did. It was just covered up in dust.

Diane: So, what kind of was the temperature that day?

Jeff: What I vaguely remember about it, it was about 90 to 95 degrees, maybe a little hotter, with 70-mile an hour winds, and just creating a lot of dirt. So, it was a big welcome relief once nightfall hit, because then you could see the glow of the red, see where the fire was at, and what we had.

Diane: So about what time would you think it got close to Ashland?

Jeff: I vaguely remember at 1 o'clock that afternoon I sent all of the employees home. I kept three truckdrivers here on hand. We thought we were going to move our semis or paddle wagons. They're a \$150,000 rig each. The three guys jumped in a truck each, and we moved them to Snake Creek Ranch thinking they would be out of the way of the fire. That's a half million dollar saving there just to get out of the way. And we did that. I got back to Ashland about 3 o'clock that afternoon. And that's when I told the drivers to leave and get out of town.

Diane: Was that about the time that they started evacuating Ashland?

Jeff: Yes.

Diane: So, did you stay around your business, or did you go out and try to help with the fire?

Jeff: I was around my business. I was here pretty close. I stayed mainly here in town, you know, just because I wanted to watch hot spots coming into town once the fire got closer.

Diane: So, did you do anything besides move trucks to protect your property?

Jeff: Not really, we didn't. No, just a lot of prayers.

Diane: Anything at your house?

Jeff: No. My wife and kids grabbed the dogs and a few belongings and left.

Diane: So, where did they evacuate to?

Jeff: They went to Protection to my dad's house, and then from Protection when they evacuated it, they went on to Coldwater.

Diane: So when did they return?

Jeff: They returned the next day.

Diane: Were you in contact with them?

Jeff: I was in contact with them, yes, by cell phone.

Diane: So they knew what you were up to most of the night?

Jeff: And there was a lot of citizens after they shut down the highways and everything, that found out that I was in town and they were calling me and asking me to check on their houses and what have you.

Diane: So, were you up all night?

Jeff: Pretty much up all night, yeah. I got the heck scared out of me. Finally, at 4 o'clock in the morning, I went home and I remember the air conditioner running. I fell asleep in the chair and the electricity went out. And when the electricity went out it blinked, it scared me, because I thought, where's that fire at now? I jumped up, and it wasn't nowhere around, but I got about an hour or 45 minutes of sleep there, so that was about it.

Diane: So, closer in the morning, could you see where the fire was around – could you see the glow all over?

Jeff: Yeah, you could see it glow everywhere, yeah.

Diane: So did you mostly stay in the south part of town then?

Jeff: I stayed in the south part of town. I've got a large wheat field right to the east of my house, and that was my plan where I was going to go if trouble did arise here in town.

Diane: So what about your dad? Did he come back to town?

Jeff: Dad came back to town. He grabbed his stuff and he left. I was the only one still in town here.

Diane: Did you notice the temperature change during the night?

Jeff: A little bit of a temperature change, but noticed a big wind change. The wind changed directions and came out of the north, and that's when everything took the fire back towards the southeast.

Diane: So, did it get real close down here?

Jeff: It was approximately, I'm going to say a quarter of a mile east of Ashland, and then a quarter of a mile to the west here. Maybe not quite that far, maybe 600 yards to the west edge of Ashland here.

Diane: So, did you see any firetrucks or farmers with their spray rigs during the evening?

Jeff: I'd seen all that, yes. Firetrucks...

Diane: Was it pretty busy across here?

Jeff: It was extremely busy, yes.

Diane: That part of your business that's the tire shop, were they busy throughout the night?

Jeff: Not so much at night. We did have one employee that made it back into town, and we were trying to strictly help people that were fighting the fire, you know, fixing tires and keeping pumps going and that sort of stuff the best we could.

Diane: So do you have a lot of parts on hand, and you do have a lot of tires right here?

Jeff: Yes. Lots of parts and equipment and tires on hand.

Diane: So, when did most of your employees start filtering back into town?

Jeff: They started filtering back in about noon the following day, on the 7th.

Diane: So, did you have a game plan? Did you have people already asking what they could do or how they could help?

Jeff: The first call I got was about 5 o'clock on the morning of the 7th from my brother, Kendall Kay. He's the mayor of Ashland and he said, "We're gonna have a situation here on our hands when this all dies down about donations coming in. With your hay business, knowing the farmers and everything, would you be interested in putting your name out there to the KLA for hay donations and helping coordinate that?" And I said, "Kendall, I'll do the best I can." And that was kind of what started me into the whole donation coordinator part of it.

Diane: Did you expect as much as what showed up?

Jeff: No, I did not.

Diane: So when did you first figure out that you were going to need some kind of a plan?

Jeff: It was that day on the 7th coordinating kind of with my brother Kendall. They got a core group of us together and we went out to the Gardner Angus Ranch. Everybody put our heads together. It was a very well thought out plan, and we put it together. We downloaded an app to where we could all kind of talk back and forth, and we went about our way. It just – people jumped in and we got the job done. And it's very heartwarming knowing the citizens of Ashland did this.

Diane: So, how many people did you have contact with, usually? Was there kind of a group of people that you were always talking to?

Jeff: There was a group of people that I was always talking to. Just a little bit of statistics that I had, handling the donation part of it, the fire happened to be on our payday here at our company. We get paid every two weeks. But the first two weeks of the fire I turned in 193 hours of just helping unload. I'm not a hero by any means. I just wanted to do my part. And I tried my best. I've got four land lines here at the feed mill and I've got a cell phone. My cell phone's always a 24-hour call. It's got an answering machine on it if I don't answer the call then I will call you back. But in the first three weeks after the fire when they sent me back, just my cellphone alone I had 4,945 calls in three weeks on my cell phone. It was just overwhelming the amount of people from outside the world that cared about us and brought us supplies in to help us get back on our feet.

Diane: When was the first donation? When did it first arrive?

Jeff: Quickly. Quickly. I would say – I think, if I vaguely remember right, the fire was on Monday and by Wednesday morning there was hay already starting to come in. It was not long-haul hay, but it was local right here in Kansas pretty close, and it was starting to roll in already.

Diane: So what was the plan? You would take all of the hay here and then distribute it?

Jeff: The plan I had, I mean, I was just unloading trucks and the farmers and ranchers that were in need that had been affected by the fire, it was there for them. I was just kind of unloading loads.

Diane: You had a spot to keep all this?

Jeff: I had a place. A lot that we were using that Smithfield Food, that we make their pig feed for them, they had some milo stored in that lot and it happened to be empty at the time, and it all worked out great. We were able to unload the hay in there. We stacked I don't know how many thousands of bales in there, so it worked out perfect. It was right here by the business at the south end of Ashland. It felt like we helped a lot of people.

Diane: Did you work 24 hours?

Jeff: Pretty close. Not quite, but pretty close. I felt like the people that were donating – they've got lives, they've got families, too. They wanted to get in here and get out, so I had people rolling in at 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning. I felt like I needed to help keep their lives moving so they could get back home to their families, too. So I tried accommodating both ways.

Diane: So did most trucks hauling hay come in in convoy?

Jeff: A lot of it did.

Diane: So about how many trucks?

Jeff: The average was probably 10 to 11 trailer loads at a time. We did have some convoys that come in that had 30 to 50 trucks.

Diane: So how many bales would be on a truck?

Jeff: Probably about 18 on a smaller trailer. The semis would have 30 bales to them.

Diane: Were they all big round bales, or did you get any small square bales?

Jeff: It was a mixture of everything. It was small squares. It was big rounds, big squares, it was alfalfa, it was grass hay, it was straw, it was just everything.

Diane: So, did the trucks bringing in the bales also bring in fencing supplies?

Jeff: They brought fencing supplies. They brought food. They brought just anything imaginable. It was – from Chapstick clear on up to canned goods to just everything. We've seen it all.

Diane: Did you get a lot of calf starter, milk and stuff?

Jeff: We had a lot of milk replacer. There at one time I know I was sitting on 21 ton of milk replacer in the shed. I had a shed that was empty. We put all the bag feed and everything in there where it was out of the weather.

Diane: So you spoke about food donations. Was it mostly canned goods?

Jeff: A lot of canned goods. A lot of ready-made food for right now, you know. With all the donations coming in, a lot of people that wanted to help build fence, fix fence, wanted to – there was just a lot of people, they had to eat. Ashland is a small town. We don't have a lot of motel rooms. We don't have a lot of restaurants. It was overwhelming from the word go, you know. There was a lot of fire departments from other parts of the world in here. It was just a big overwhelming deal. But the pride in my heart, and smile, Ashland, Kansas did it.

Diane: Where they had a lot of volunteers stay happens to be pretty close to where...

Jeff: Right here in the south end of Ashland.

Diane: So did it get a little bit busy down in this part of town sometimes?

Jeff: It was a little bit chaotic at times, but people were very calm and we handled it – can't really say that we had a plan, but we made it work. It came together.

Diane: It came together. So, people in your organization here that helped unload – that became part of your employee's job was to help with the donations?

Jeff: Part of our employees' jobs were helping with, yes, the donations. You know, one thing I've got to say, we've been in business here for 26 years at the south end of Ashland. The farmers and ranchers have grown our business. It was Ashland Feed and Seed's turn to give back. And I felt like we all jumped in with both feet and did the best we could, plus keep a business running. So, we traveled a lot of miles outside of this area, and there were a lot of people that weren't affected by the fire that still needed feed, so we had to look after them, too. But we did it.

Diane: Did you find yourself coming and going sometimes?

Jeff: About four different directions, yes.

Diane: And this went on for a month, or longer?

Jeff: It went on longer. You know, I'd say it was three months, probably, when things finally started to die off. And then I asked by September 1, 2017, if we would have the hay lot cleaned up to where we could go back into the business of putting milo on the ground for Smithfield Foods, and we did that. Today is July 23rd. I'm gonna say it was about a year after the fire somewhere around April of 2018. We've got security cameras here at Ashland Feed and Seed, and there was, I think it was a woman, it was a very heartwarming deal. Somehow, she slipped through the security cameras and she walked up to the front door on a Saturday afternoon and tied a sack off to the front door of Ashland Feed and Seed. And anyway, inside the sack there was not a card, I could not tell you who the lady was, where she'd come from, but it was a Carhart coat. And it said, "Jeff, I want to thank you for everything you've done in the last year. Stay warm." And you know, people appreciate it. So, like I said, I'm not a hero. I just wanted to do my part and I tried doing it the best I could.

Diane: What was the most surprising thing that you had donated?

Jeff: I don't know. I'm going to have to think about that one. You caught me off guard there.

Diane: So at one point, instead of having all the hay come to Ashland Feed and Seed to be dispersed, they started having it just go right to the people, right? Did it stop through here?

Jeff: I tried to shove as much of it out to the farm as I could just for handling purposes. Farmers have got lives. They were stressed by the fire and everything. So, anything that came in after hours, any large convoys that would come in that would really take a lot of farmers' time, I didn't try sending that out to the farm. I tried relieving some of that stress on them and let them know that it would be here later.

Diane: So, if it did go out to the farm, and it wasn't that farmer needing it, who guided the...

Jeff: One of our Ashland Feed and Seed's employees, or myself. I would say, let's go, this is where we're going to go.

Diane: So, most of your employees know, because they've been delivering stuff to different farms. So, did any of your employees volunteer in other ways besides just doing the hay?

Jeff: Pretty much. They helped some down in the community with unloading trucks and canned foods and food down there and that sort of stuff. Some of them went out and helped some of the employees that had some of their farms burnt. We went out and helped some of our employees clean their stuff up.

Diane: Did you have some employees that they went and had to do that first before they could come back to work.

Jeff: Yep, yep, they did. They did.

Diane: So, did you take advantage of the different places where they had food available for volunteers, like up at the school? Did you go eat there, or over here at the ...

Jeff: Not really. We went over to the Christian Church Camp a time or two. Them ladies were good about coming and finding us and said, "You need to take a break for just a little bit and come and eat with us." Back to your question, the most interesting thing that I think that came in was the Wisconsin cheese curds. It was, you know, very fresh – it was very good. But they wanted to say a thank you to us, too, and they delivered it straight to the employees here.

Diane: That's cool. So, where was the furthest donation that you can recall?

Jeff: That I can recall, I had some hay that came out of Wisconsin, Michigan – I don't know which one of them would have been further, but there was some hay that came in that had at least 1,500 miles on it. So, several of the convoys that came in, they had blown two or three tires along the way. And they would pull into a place to get a new tire, and somebody would say, "Let me buy that tire for you." You know, they'd seen it, or they'd pull in to get fuel and somebody would pull up and say, "If you're going that way, let me buy the fuel for you." So, you know, it was just America helping out each other.

Diane: So did these people tell you how they found about the fire, or how they knew that you needed hay here?

Jeff: It was a lot of – probably our first disaster we've ever had since we had Facebook. Once it got put out on Facebook, I mean, it exploded. People really came to help. So, probably the first natural disaster we've ever had to work with social media.

Diane: Any of the people that brought hay, did they make more than one trip? What do you think were the most trips?

Jeff: Yes. And long-haul trips. I mean there were some out of Ohio that came three times.

Diane: Did they tell you how long it took them to get here?

Jeff: A lot of them took 20 hours.

Diane: And they were all – these are their own personal vehicles.

Jeff: Their own personal vehicles. Their own personal hay and it was just to donate it.

Diane: And if they were with a company, the company was letting them do this on the company time?

Jeff: Company time, yeah.

Diane: And it was all donated, right?

Jeff: All donated.

Diane: Did any of them want compensation, or did they want any kind of recognition for what they were giving?

Jeff: No. A lot of them, the only thing they asked for is a receipt to where they could show that they did donate it for a tax write-off.

Diane: Who gave them the receipt?

Jeff: Larry Conrady did with Ashland Community Foundation.

Diane: And how did they decide how much what they brought was worth?

Jeff: I don't know. I didn't get into that. Roughly, alfalfa hay, a semi load of it is going to be about right at \$4,000. And that's 30 bales to a truck.

Diane: So, if this guy's got a few, maybe he didn't lose any of his herd and he's got 60 head of cattle. How long would a semi of 30 bales last him?

Jeff: You know, a cow in condition – a cow is going to eat 30 pounds of feed a day, 30-40 pounds I'd say. But, the fire burnt everything she had, so she's going to have to eat 30-40 pounds a day just to maintain herself.

Diane: So, when you were doling out hay and you had farmers coming in and getting just exactly what they needed, or even if they didn't get burned out. Did you hear some real horror stories from people? Did they share?

Jeff: I heard some horror stories. There were some grumbling people thought they were getting more than others. But I said, "People, we're in this all together. Let's not worry about it, and it'll all come out in the long run." So, for the most part, everything worked out fine.

Diane: Did you find yourself being a counselor of some sort?

Jeff: Yeah. That was the part I was unprepared for.

Diane: Did you have anybody help you know what to say, or did you just kind of hug it out, and go for it right?

Jeff: No. I just let her fly. Yeah, and we just did the best we could. So, a lot of tears shed, even though I didn't lose anything, I cried right with them.

Diane: It's hard not to, isn't it?

Jeff: Yeah, it is. It is.

Diane: Because they lost a lot. So, how would you describe it? Was it more of an emotional loss here, a physical, or a financial loss for, like the whole town? Or is there a combination? Have we kind of gotten over – got through some things? Are we still dealing with it?

Jeff: We've kind of got through some things. My personal take about it is you know, the financial end of it. They guys were hurt some, but the government stepped in to help a little bit. The emotional side of it – there's going to be some memories that stick there. A lot of these guys have raised their cows from babies. They do a lot of AI and a lot of breeding that way, so they know their cows. They care about their livestock like it's part of their family. And that following morning there's a lot of them had to go out there and shoot their own cows because they weren't dead yet, and that was tough, emotionally on them. So, I'm going to say split it a third each way between emotional and financial and physical.

Diane: So, hearing your children do a lot of hunting and trapping, so how did that affect – what did you see after the fire when you went out and set traps?

Jeff: It affected that quite a bit. I mean, the coyotes come back into the country. They can cover a large territory. But the deer herd, they usually don't travel in a great big amount of miles, you know. They may roam 3, 4, 5 miles, but they're not going to go the 40 or 50 like a coyote could, possibly. All the smaller wildlife, the raccoons, the possums, the skunks, they were wiped completely out, you know. But the coyotes did come back rapidly. Right now, a year and a half later, we're starting to see a few deer back, but it's going to take a while to grow the herd back to the quality that we had. There are some quail around I'm seeing this summer, so things are trying to get back to normal. And rain helps things tremendously, and we've had a good wet summer here, the last half of May, June, and July so far.

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

Jeff: My most vivid memory is the night of the fire. Like I said, smelling smoke, feeling the heat, and not knowing where it's at. Just the fear. It's a feeling I'll never forget. It's a fear that I'll never, ever forget.

Diane: So who are some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful, either during the fire or after the fire?

Jeff: I didn't have much contact with very many agencies. This Christian Church Camp over here, they were a huge help. Holly Fast was a huge help trying to line out help. Kim Hazen kind of took that over from her and helped out there. It was just very overwhelming, you know? The Ashland Vet Center did a tremendous job. The Ashland Community Foundation, they were tremendous, too, being able to send people there that wanted to make a cash donation. Just the whole town of Ashland – everybody came together in this. The Ashland School – they opened it up. You just couldn't have picked a better time to be on spring break, I guess. If you've got to be gone, the kids you know, you had all the classrooms and everything there. The fire departments, the emergency management crew up there, the Sheriff's Department, the list just goes on and on, and I know I'm going to leave some people out. But, I'm just going to put an umbrella over the whole town of Ashland. I mean, it was just tremendous.

Diane: So, can you perceive of anything positive that has come from the fire?

Jeff: Togetherness. I mean, people looking out for each other. They really did. You know, farmers and ranchers that were neighbors, they'd come together and helped each other out. I don't – I am not going to mention any names, but we've got two brothers that hadn't spoken to each other in 10, 15, 20 years. And the one brother about burned up in a pickup and his other brother saved him. And today they're talking. They're the best friends like they hadn't missed a beat. It's strange the way things happen.

Diane: That was one of the better things that came out of the whole deal, isn't it? So, this group that got together at the beginning, out at Gardner's Quarters, and divvied up the different jobs. Did they get together a few more times?

Jeff: One other time that I know of. Yes, we got together. I think there was 18 of us, and we just put a big chalkboard up there and it's what our needs are going to be. And we went down the list from hay, feed, and fencing donation, to veterinary medicine donation, to housing coordinator, to food coordinator, to media relations coordinator, just so on down the list, and we started putting people's names who would be in charge of what. And then we downloaded an app to where we could talk back and forth and send a quick text message to somebody, this person needs that, and that's the way it worked, and we pretty much didn't step on anybody's toes.

Diane: Did you miss anything?

Jeff: Not too awful much, I don't think.

Diane: So, there wasn't any like, "Oh, we should have done this."

Jeff: No. I've got one other company, you know, a large company that they specialize in disasters. And they showed up here in Ashland, Kansas and they was here for 24 hours. And they said, "We're packing up and leaving. We've never seen anything like this before. Ashland,

you've got this under control." And I had a lot of people that called me and said, "Well, we appreciate what you're doing, but we want to talk to FEMA, or we want to talk to the government officials." And I said, "They're not here. This is us ourselves." And they were just completely shocked.

Diane: So, after everything kind of died down, were you part of the after program that they got together and hashed over what happened, and how they dealt with it? Did you take part in that?

Jeff: No, I wasn't. Like I said, I was just trying to do my part, and I'm a kind of behind the scenes worker. I'm not a big – you're doing well to get me here tonight, by the way, but I'm not a media person, not a camera person. I'm just a worker and go quietly about doing my business and doing it the best I can, and that's the way I did the fire.

Diane: You've lived out in this part of Southwest Kansas all your life pretty much, and you have seen wildfires before. And you have seen fires, what they have done, as far as prairie fires and stuff. How would you compare what you have known throughout your life, and how this fire went?

Jeff: They're all very similar. The only thing – this fire right here, we had 70 mile an hour winds, and I don't know if we've ever seen that before. I hope we don't ever see it again. Once is enough for me. But a fire can be helpful, but it is a very dangerous tool under the wrong conditions, and we had the wrong conditions that day. We had high heat, high winds, and our countryside was just like a can of gasoline, and it went up in flames really quickly.

Diane: What were your thoughts when we had a fire this year on March 5th that kind of started out similar.

Jeff: Oh, brother. Not again. So, yeah, it brought up way too quick of memories. I think a lot of people are a lot more prepared. You see a lot of farmers that have spent a little bit of money and bought 250-gallon and 300-gallon water tanks of the back of a pickup with a high-pressure pump. They can get to the fire faster. They can help the fire department out. You see a lot more of that.

Diane: So that brings me to the next question, is what can you do, or what have you done to prepare for another disaster, whether it's a fire or a tornado or anything? Have you made special preparations personally or your business?

Jeff: Our business, not really. I mean, we've got a plan here in place just in case disaster does ever strike. So, yes, we've got plans here that are always in place. But, anyway, we haven't done too awful much any different.

Diane: So what about the community, or the county?

Jeff: I don't know much about that. I'm sure they have, but as I said, I don't know much because I stay here at the south end of town.

Diane: Is there some things that you think they should do?

Jeff: I really haven't ever thought of it, you know. I hadn't thought that much.

Diane: Do you think after the fire, you said it brought everybody together better – have we in ways benefited from that camaraderie?

Jeff: I hate to say we've benefited from it. But, everything in life, I'm a firm believer happens for a reason. There are a few good things that came out of it, like I said, with the two brothers. There are small things that did happen for a reason.

Diane: Do you have any other thoughts or opinions about this experience that you'd like to share?

Jeff: Don't have too awful many thoughts or opinions, no. Just at the tail end of this deal, I know this is going to go down in a book, or it's going somewhere, but I would just like to say thank you to everybody. It wasn't a fun deal to go through, but we did it, and everybody came together. I know there was people that helped me out that didn't need to. But we all helped each other and did it. So, thank you to all.