

Diana: What are your full names?

Denice: I am Denice McCarty.

Diana: Where do you live?

Denice: I live in the county west of Ashland and north of Englewood.

Diana: Okay, what is your occupation?

Denice: A little bit of everything! Wife, mother, grandmother.

Diana: How old are you?

Denice: I am 65.

Diana (to Mike): What is your name?

Mike: Mike McCarty. I live north of Englewood. I am a rancher and farmer and I'm 64.

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

Mike: I was aware of it when I was eating dinner at Marcella's in Englewood. The pager went off. I immediately, with the way the wind was blowing that day, called Bernie Smith and told him, "I'm not going to Mocane, I'll stay in Clark County, just in case."

Denice: I was in Ashland babysitting my grandson and my phone has the fire alert on it. I heard the pager go off for a fire; I couldn't hear anything beyond that, but it sounded like it was pretty desperate. So I called Mike to make sure he wasn't going anywhere. I was worried! "No, the fire was far off," he said. So I said, "Okay" and went about my business.

Diana: What was your first reaction when you found out that the fire was likely to hit your property?

Mike: Well, can I go into a little bit of detail? Thirty minutes later, Greg Goodnight called me and said, "It's already into Meade County." He had a tractor on the Clairmont Ranch with a disk hooked onto it.

Diana: He's closer to Oklahoma, right?

Mike: Well, he's closer. He lives right west of Englewood. He said, "Get on it, and head west." So I got onto it and headed west and headed down to the north after I got out west of the Clark County line and north to Ollie Goodnight's, disking. At that time, I decided that I'd better

go to... it looked like Ollie's house was going to be okay. There's a lot of farmground there, so I went to Wes McKinney's house and disked around that. Then I went to Chuck McKinney's house and disked around that house.

Diana: You say you disked around it. How many rounds did you make?

Mike: Some places, I couldn't get all the way around. So I made three or four passes on the way the wind was blowing at that time, to block it. I was headed to David Clawson's at that time. I'd just crossed the cattle guard coming out of the northeast pasture when David called and said, "Where are you at?"

I said, "I've just crossed the cattle guard." Then I said, "David, I can't remember how to get in the canyon south of your house."

He said, "I'll be right there. I'm on a tractor; you disk down in the bottom of the canyon, I'm going to go on through the trees. I can get through the trees."

So I disked in the bottom of the canyon and made about three passes. I came back out to see where the fire was at, because I could not see it. I thought I had time enough to get back down and do some more. I was down there and made one more pass and the fire came over the top of the canyon on me.

Diana: When you came out of the canyon, could you see all the smoke?

Mike: Oh yes. There was a lot of smoke when I was down in the bottom of the canyon. But I thought the fire was far enough away that it wasn't going to... I had time. But no, all the time I was there, there was smoke.

Diana: So when you say the "fire came over you in the canyon," did it just jump the canyon?

Mike: It just came right on over me and I was in the middle of the disked ground. It was simple to say, but I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face and I couldn't find my way out of there. I about fell off into the creek side of the canyon, so I called Greg Goodnight and said, "Where are you at?" and he said, "I'm at the east end of the Grove tree row.

I said, "I'm in the bottom of the canyon south of David's house. Can you come and lead me out?" So he came there and led me out of there. He didn't even see me until he was basically right on top of me and I was on his tail all the way out of there.

Diana: Was it grey smoke or black smoke?

Mike: Black.

Diana: Pitch black?

Mike: It was greyish black. I could not see anything.

Diana: Did it clear off after a little bit?

Mike: Not all the time I was in the bottom of the canyon, it didn't. When I got out, it was a greyish smoke on top.

Diana: So where'd you go once you got out of the canyon?

Mike: I got out and talked to David Clawson, and he gave me a bottle of water and gave me a pep talk. Then I went north of the Quonset and went into the horse pasture. I was trying to... but first off, when I was in the bottom of the canyon, I had my walkie with me. I heard Bernie call Comanche County and say to go to Mike McCarty's house.

Diana: Oh. They were close to your house and needed Comanche County to come over?

Mike: To help save the house.

Diana: And you weren't anywhere close to where you could go.

Mike: And all this time, I think I kept taking time to call you (Denice).

Diana: Mike called me, "I'm going to go over and try to disk around some houses. It's so much farther advanced than what we ever thought

Denice: Mike called me. When I knew he wasn't going, that was fine, but when he was called in, he called me and said, "I'm going to go over and try to disk around some houses. It is so much farther advanced than what we ever thought. I don't know."

So, I said, "Okay." So I knew he wasn't at home, but still I didn't think it was ever going to get that far. So Kelly, my daughter-in-law, came home for lunch from work at about 12:00, and she ate real quick. I was telling her about the fire and she said, "Well, do you think I should go out there?"

And I said, "I don't think, surely, that it's going to get this far. Everybody is out fighting it, I can't imagine it will get that far."

She went back to work a little bit early, and then she came back and she was changing her clothes and said, "I think I'm going to go out there anyway." I think she called her dad and Travis was clear over... I don't know where he was, some town in western Kansas. But he drove and met them there so they were all at the house. I did not really know what was going on. They were trying to let me know. I knew things were burning around the house, but they were trying to hurry and get... We had limbs still down from the ice storm that had dried in the yard and around a lot of things, vehicles and what have you, so they were trying to get those out of the way and move those. The yard sprinklers were still winterized, but they figured out how to get that done and get the yard sprinklers on, because we have tall fescue right around our house. It burnt clear up to that and they were able to save the house. But the whole while, I didn't know where Mike was. I didn't know what was going on for sure with Kelly and Travis and her dad.

Diana: Were you still in Ashland while this was going on?

Denice: Yes. Then, as I was feeling all this and not knowing for sure, town started to get smoky. I got the page before they actually came around to evacuate Ashland.

Diana: So did you get the IRIS (Immediate Response Information System) alert on your phone that said to evacuate?

Denice: Yes, it came over my phone. So I called Kelly immediately and told her that they were evacuating the city of Ashland. I'm grabbing things for the baby as I'm talking to her and getting the dogs and all of that. I didn't know which way to go. You know, I had their son. He's my grandson, but... she said to come out west. Everybody in Ashland was not going in that direction, but I went ahead. Because I had notice sooner than most people in town, I was able to get out of town. I think if I had not found out as early as I did, I might not have. We drove out west and they were stopping traffic at the junction.

Diana: Who was stopping traffic?

Denice: The state department.

Diana: The DOT?

Denice: Yes. I wasn't very nice, because honestly, I said, "That is my house burning and over there to the southwest are my cows. I don't think they're going to make it." I said, "I'm obviously not going to drive anyplace harmful, I've got my grandson here with me." I did tell her that I was going. I said, "You're not stopping me; I am driving through here, and you can tell John Ketron. It's okay, I'll deal with him later."

Diana: When you said they saved your house, who was at your house saving it?

Mike: Well, Comanche County was there.

Diana: Did they get there?

Mike: Then when Travis got there and got the sprinklers turned on, they went ahead and left for Mark and Eva Gardener's house at that time. They knew that we were going to be okay, so they went on to Mark and Eva's house.

Diana: Were they too late?

Mike: Yes.

Diana: It had already gone. How fast would you say that fire was moving when it came over you and went through your house?

Denice: Well, the wind was 70 miles an hour.

Mike: I think it was moving 80 miles an hour or more. The air was burning in front of the fire.

Diana: So was the wind shifting at that time? Or was it still blowing mainly out of the west?

Denice: Well, I was going to say that when I did turn, I pulled in at the corner (I did not drive south to my house, even though everything in my bones wanted to go as close as I could and see exactly), but when I looked to the southwest, it was flames the entire way for as far as the eye could see.

Mike: It was Mayhew's house burning at that time.

Diana: Was that the little house on the corner?

Denice: It had to have been, yes. As you looked to the northeast, as far as you could see to the northeast, everything was on fire. It was one huge line of fire and smoke.

Diana: What about west of that junction? Like at Clawson's, had that already gone through?

Denice: It was still going at that time. I imagine that I got through when I drove out west of Ashland, I probably got through not too long before it actually got to the highway. You know, like Garth Gardiner's house and west of their place. I will never, ever forget the sight of the fire. It was something I would have never imagined could happen.

Diana: Did you finally make it down to your house?

Denice: No.

Mike: She went to Greensburg.

Denice: I stayed and Kelly's dad came up and was at the junction, because I was beside myself. I did not have any contact with Mike. I didn't know where he was or if he was okay or anything. I didn't know if our house was still there or if our cattle were there.

Mike: I was on the phone with a lot of people, like Mark Kaltenbaugh, I said, "Get out here and get your cattle moved off the pasture and take them across the highway and on my wheat." I even called Walker's. I was on the phone...

Diana: So she wouldn't have been able to get ahold of you because you were doing neighborly...

Mike: After I came out of the canyon, I went north of the Quonset that burnt and then into the horse pasture.

Diana: Had it already burned by that time you came out of the canyon?

Mike: No. We started up going on an angle to keep it from going on to the north because the wind was still blowing that way. We made two passes and when we got to the other end, the wind at that time had switched. Don't ask me what time of day it was because it was all a blur. The wind had switched; I came out of there and I realized that the fire was still going to the north over the Sandbur pasture. So I thought, well, I didn't know where it all was, I just knew it had crossed the highway. So I disked there to keep it from going on north because of how the fire goes into the wind. I disked there and then I went on down the road and disked around Jacque Johnson's, the Harden house, and stuff like that. It was getting later in the evening and I went back to Claremont and dropped the tractor off and went home.

Denice: I already knew, they didn't really say, but the kids went to try to move the cows out. They were too late, they were just too late.

Diana: Because it happened so fast.

Denice: Yes.

Mike: When I got to the house, it was already dark. We didn't have electricity or anything like that, and Travis was trying to pour water off of his vet box (we have a wooden fence around the house) and Travis was trying to put it out with his little sprayer and bottles of water that he had. So we hugged each other and we hung around there with no electricity or anything.

Denice: Kelly had grabbed clothes and office supplies out of the house. I grabbed what I could out of their house, because they really weren't too sure here in Ashland whether their house was going to be okay. So she grabbed stuff, and eventually I wound up... I had to leave because I had the baby. So I went to Greensburg that night to stay with Kelly's mom and dad.

Diana: How did you get to Greensburg?

Denice: I drove north through Minneola. The decision was made, once again, just in time. It was just by luck, not because anybody knew anything.

Mike: Before, when I was going... before I was even at Ollie Goodnight's house, C.J. Beckford was coming with water and he got turned around because there was another fire up at Denton's. There were several other fires that whole night, the whole evening. When I got back home, we went and looked at what we could do. We just thought, "Well, we'd better just stay here." Because it was probably 11:00 by the time I got back to the house and everything. I know the rest of the firemen were out, but I was just drained.

Diana: Did you have any food to eat? Did anybody show up with water or anything?

Mike: No, not at that time. Food was the last thing on my mind.

Diana: No, you weren't really hungry, were you.

Mike: We had bottled water in the shop and that, but we just went there and closed our eyes in the chair in case something else went wrong. I had the walkie and I know that my fellow firefighters were out all night, but I was just...

Denice: Mike's the oldest on the Englewood Fire Department.

Mike: I was drained. The next morning, we talked to Denice.

Denice: I didn't see Mike until the next evening.

Mike: Travis and I went out. Kenny Allison showed up... This is hard.

Denice: This is about the cows.

Mike: We started putting cows to sleep at the house. You know, we cried a lot all three of us. Grown men cried, and then we would laugh. We would see something funny, like an armadillo that was dead, or something like that. But there at the house, we fed some hay. And then the damn hay caught on fire, but we fed.

Diana: It was okay until you spread it out?

Denice: Well, we had trees.

Mike: Most of our hay was burned up, but we put some hay out because I went up to the north house that did not burn and got some hay. There wasn't many places for the cows that wasn't dead that there wasn't fire. We put it out where we thought it was okay, and then it turned around and caught on fire again. We was worried that they was going to get burned up and all this type of stuff. So then we headed south to Sand Creek, north of Englewood, and it was just all that we saw down there, and we made the decision after we was in there that we needed to get those cows down there back home. We called Mike Greenleaf and we called several other people, Arderies from Greensburg came down with a four-wheeler. Mike Greenleaf came with a ground-load trailer and we tried to get those cattle together as good as we could. He went back home to get the feed truck, and the feed truck out to Shaw's to get some feed because they didn't have nothing else, and I blew an airline because it got too hot there, because Kenny was able to move the trucks and some of the stuff out of the way. So I parked it at Jim Cox's... in another bad spot where fire was coming back! But anyway, you (Denice) came by and picked me up. That was the first I had seen you.

Denice: Yes, that was the first time we had seen each other.

Mike: Yes, Denice came by and got me. I went back down to Sand Creek and got the cattle together what we could. We were started to put cows down and started loading cattle.

Denice: We didn't have any stock trailers, they were all burned up.

Diana: Or didn't have any floorboards in them.

Mike: Nothing. Then a friend of ours from Wichita showed up, Dennis Noyes. I don't know all the...

Denice: So many good people.

Mike: He showed up down there and started helping us. Then Dr. Dave Rethorst showed up.

Diana: From Manhattan? He's kind of a local boy.

Mike: Anyway, he helped and we loaded cattle that could walk.

Diana: So this was still Tuesday?

Mike: Yes, the next day. Was that Tuesday? I can't remember. It was the seventh. So we loaded them up and brought them back home, then Dennis Noyes went out and was killing cows.

Denice: I had a... You know, Pat and Jerry Krier live up the road, what, is it a mile even?

Mike: Yes.

Denice: Jerry couldn't do anything, but he wanted to see what was... what do you do? He sat up there and listened to them, one after another.

Mike: This was a couple days after. We had hay delivered that first day from people from Fowler.

Denice: And the only place we had to put it was in the driveway. In the driveway was the only place that wasn't burning or hadn't burned. There wasn't any way to drive around to get up to our house very easily.

Diana: So, the second day, did the fire come back?

Mike: No. We was burned out so bad, there was nothing left.

Diana: So you were putting the cattle you were bringing home into a corral or something?

Mike: We were putting them into a little lot that didn't have grass or anything. It had feed bunks there, and we started feeding them there. We were sorting cattle at that time. We sorted them down there and then we sorted cattle there. Then the next day, it must have been Wednesday, we kept sorting. The first day, Dave came to the house and said, "Denice, you've got to get the hell out of here."

Denice: I was in the house when the babies... and I just felt like, this is my deal too. I just have to buck up. I never thought I'd ever experience anything like this. But then the next day, I waited and Dave came to the house and said, "I'm not doing anything until you leave."

Diana: So did you have a lot of smoke damage in the house?

Denice: Yes. We had a fifth wheel, I don't know why it didn't take on. I don't know if it was spared out of the blue or what the deal was, but we finally had to move into that. Then our insurance company, when that guy was out, said this house has to be cleaned by professionals. So we had to go through that. We joke around about that, but we're still trying to find stuff since they did that.

Mike: I guess it was the second day, Mushrush Red Angus from Strong City, Kansas, brought us a skid steer.

Denice: Our skid steer was burned up.

Mike: And they brought hay before the end of the evening. Our son-in-law, Jeff Jones, from Seneca showed up...

Denice: We didn't know. That almost did me in. Travis belonged to the Farmhouse Fraternity, and that night, even though we didn't have anywhere to... they slept all over every nook and cranny in Travis and Kelly's house. But they came, and they came with equipment. That night, our son-in-law, Melinda's husband, is a Farmhouse Fraternity Alumni, a fraternity brother of Travis's. We'd talked to the kids and stuff, but anyway, when those guys all got together, there were probably ten of them. Jeff was the farthest one away, but we didn't think he was coming.

Mike: He came before the Farmhouse guys came. He brought hay and then he headed back.

Denice: I just started bawling the second I saw him.

Diana: When did your kids that live away know how you were and where you were after the fire? Did you talk to them Monday night?

Mike: I really don't know!

Denice: He doesn't know. I talked to them.

Mike: I left that up to Denice. Because, I didn't communicate.

Denice: I talked to them, and they wanted to come right away. My problem was, I did not want my grandkids to see that, I guess until we were better. No, until... I don't know. I just really hated it. I knew it was going to make them sad and it did. But it was probably a week and a half before they came home.

Mike: But Jeff was here, and a lot of the Farmhouse guys came that weekend and helped to clean up and that type of stuff. Then we had numerous friends with Jim all show up.

Denice: And when our kids did come, they all came at one time. There was so much to do, and we had those three skid steers on loan, and the girls... You think, "Well, they forgot anything they ever knew when they left home." But all of a sudden, those two girls were out on a skid steer fighting about who got the one with a cab, and things like that.

Mike: And Dad loves you better than he loves me!

Diana: Things were normal.

Denice: Yes, it was good to have them there.

Mike: But on the Sunday (this is all a blur and everything), we decided that we was going to run all of our cows through. With Travis being a veterinarian, he can take and sign off on our own cattle, because Travis and I went a couple days later to other people's places to help put cattle down and that kind of stuff. We decided we was going run our cows through. Denice has a nephew that is a veterinary that graduated the same day Travis did. He's from Scott City.

Denice: His name is Curt Vogel, and his wife Tatum came and brought food and they worked their tails off.

Mike: Denise and Todd Cleckler, that works for Clawson, came over and helped and we ran everything through and we preg checked every one and looked at every leg and every eye and everything like that. Past employee Jeremy Miller came from Medicine Lodge. He's kind of a gun fanatic, and Travis called him up earlier that morning and said, "Jeremy you'd better bring a lot more bullets," because that was the thing. It was hard to find enough bullets. So he brought several guns and a lot of bullets. He got there and he couldn't put a cow down.

Denice: Because he had helped with a lot of them.

Diana: They were personal friends.

Denice: Yes.

Diana: When you first started finding the cattle, like Monday evening after the fire...

Mike: Monday evening, we did not find anything.

Diana: So it was Tuesday before you saw any?

Mike: It was Tuesday before we saw anything.

Diana: What were some of the things? Was the hide burned completely off? Hooves gone?

Mike: Some was completely dead, with just the hide off, burned. Some their hair scorched. Some of them, their bags were burned up. Some of them, their feet were gone. Some of their eyes were popped completely out of their heads.

Diana: Did you find any miracle cattle that weren't affected?

Mike: We had some there were not affected by the fire, and don't know what happened.

Diana: Or where they were.

Mike: Or why or anything like that. But we lost right at 50 percent of our cattle. We saved... but we're still finding problems. We're still doctoring on calves and stuff like that. We lost... I had more cows die than we did calves, for some reason. We was right in the middle of calving, so you know. People said, "Why didn't you get your own cattle moved out?" Well, from where they was at, it was going to take nine miles to drive them to a wheat field. Somebody would have gotten hurt.

Diana: Did you have more than one burial place?

Mike: We had several burial places.

Diana: Did you bury them in the pasture where you found the majority of them?

Mike: We was going to bury cattle at home, and of course my mind wasn't working very clearly, Dr. Redthorst said, "How close are you to water?" I said, "About six feet. We're changing our spot." So we had to call and get trucks and we'd haul cattle to another spot that was on top of a hill and that type of stuff. We sent a lot of cattle to Booker, to the packing plant for dog food.

Diana: Did it take a lot of time to get everything buried and assessed and stuff?

Mike: It took time. There was people from other places that came in with dozers. I cannot tell you their names, but they came in with dozers and dug holes and pushed them in for us and

buried them back out. It took a while for the veterinarians to sign off on it. Our insurance company was out right away.

Diana: They took care of your house and your buildings. Did you lose any buildings?

Mike: We didn't lose any buildings. We got one tack room, horse barn, started fire. I don't know how it didn't burn. Inside the working barn, there was a bale of hay. The dog had laid on the bale and kind of had it moved out.

Denice: He found spots inside that had burned. He's very lucky that it didn't just go ahead and torch them. I feel lucky that our house was saved, because, my goodness, we have so many friends that lost their house too. I can't even imagine.

Diana: What about fence line or pasture? Did you lose all your pasture plus all your fence?

Mike: Ninety-seven percent of our grass was burned. We're down to the last six miles of fence, right now. I'm not exactly for sure... we replaced 40 some miles of fence. We've been at it ever since the fire. We had to build fence to hold cattle into the pens at home. People showed up right and left, we don't even know who they all was. Alex Stapleton showed up with his crew and grabbed t-posts and went around and held things up. People showed up with electric fence and...

Denice: It sounds like we know everyone that was there to help, but we don't because there were probably ten times as many people as we've mentioned.

Diana: Did you get some of the volunteers that came to town to help tear out fence?

Mike: Oh yes, there were a lot of people that came; Derek Hubbard and Alex Stapleton that showed up and just pitched in and done wherever they needed to be.

Diana: Local people.

Mike: Sean Labelle came out. We'd have lost a lot more cattle, but about a week before that, we'd moved 70-some head of first-calf heifers out on wheat pasture.

Diana: So they were okay?

Mike: They were okay.

Denice: So many people did so many things that you can't really keep track of. I can remember, maybe on Wednesday after... no, it was Tuesday. I was kind of nursing a fire that kept flaring up from a tree that had gone down with a hose. I thought, "I'm just going to down there and grab a hoe and a shovel." I realized then we had no shovels, no hoses, no rakes, no hoes, nothing. So I thought, well, the next time I go to town, I'm going to go to the lumber yard

and get those. I had to go somewhere else and do something, I don't remember what that was, but I came back a few hours later and sitting leaned up against the porch was three rakes, three shovels and three hoes and buckets. Brand new! That somebody had left.

Mike: And they left rolls and doughnuts in the house.

Denice: The Christian Church brought breakfast burritos, and all those fraternity boys were thrilled to death! They just came out and just threw sacks at them. That was wonderful! But that was just one example.

Diana: So you don't know where the shovels and hoes came from?

Denice: I don't know for sure, but I think Kristi Lee and Ryan Lee came out, because they had Home Depot on it...I don't know what organization...

Diana: I think the Lion's Club. But she didn't tell me where they were from.

Mike: There were a lot of things that we didn't know.

Denice: I just thought, "Oh wow, this is something. I mean, this has been on my mind and I come home and here it is!" One thing, we had a lot of heavy duty extension cords that we'd had forever. Mike went to go plug something in and...

Mike: I went to plug in the freezer.

Denice: That's right, he went to plug our freezers into the generator and we didn't have a darned cord one.

Mike: CMS got there right away.

Diana: So you weren't out of electricity for a long time?

Mike: A day and a half, maybe a couple days.

Denice: Not bad.

Mike: But then, like Cindy Gwaltney at High Plains Feed in Wright, Kansas, came down with a barbeque grill and cooked hamburgers for...

Denice: Everybody that was around.

Mike: People was tremendous how they done things.

Diana: Did you ever come to town to the Christian Camp and eat a meal?

Denice: No.

Mike: I did later on when I had to bring some people through town, but it was a week later.

Denice: That was the nicest part about the breakfast burritos, because there's no way that any of us would have found time to go to town for that. I couldn't get over it. And the other thing is, that our kids, Melinda and Jeff are from Seneca. Seneca came like no other. They sent food...

Mike: They was in contact with Jeff Kay and Jeff told them that since Melinda was there... well, they brought a lot out to our place too. But what was it, three days after the fire, our banker, Lindsey Martin called up and said, "Don't worry. We've got your back." And then Candy Murphy called.

Denice: You know, when you're in your mid-sixties and something like this happens... You know, we're never out of the woods, but now you're looking at half of everything you ever had and you've worked your whole life for.

Mike: We might not make it yet. But the volunteers, like Denice said, Seneca came and shortly after that, well, I guess that Alberto out of Garden City hauled the first load of cattle to Booker Pack for nothing. Then when we had the next load, I called him up and said, "I want to pay for this, but I need another truck."

He said, "I don't have anybody, but I'll get somebody." Well, his name's Michael Miller from Lakin. He showed up and I really liked the young man. He showed up while it was still dark. We got the cattle loaded earlier than what we wanted to.

He gave me his phone number and said, "Anything I can do to help." A couple three days later, there was three trucks came from Michigan, and he led them in. There was this young man that was driving a blue old Chevrolet semi-truck. This kid got out of there, and at the time, he was 19 years old and as illegal as all get out. He came all the way from Michigan.

Denice: And he's a life-long friend now.

Mike: I got him unloaded and he came up to me to the tractor, because at that time I did get a different tractor to unload hay with, and he handed me a wad of money.

I said, "I don't want it." He threw it in the tractor. So, we talked afterwards and everything, and they said, "We'd like to load his trailer onto another truck." We tried to load it, and we couldn't do it. So I called Jeff Kay to see if we could come to town, because they didn't want that young man to drive that truck all the way back to Michigan. He said to go out to Gardiners. So I called Scott Tune and went out to Gardiners. Nick Johnson from the Christian Church was standing there, and I said, "Lane, I want you to meet this person. This is Nick Johnson, the Christian Church Minister." I said, "Nick, this young man gave me this money," and I handed it to him. Lane said, "You really done that?" And I thought I'd made him

mad. “You really done that?” I said, “Yes, I did.” Lane said, “I’ll be back.” He came back with another load of hay, and then he came out and stayed a full week.

Denice: During his vacation, he took his vacation.

Mike: He stayed a full week of work, and he wants to come back again. Every so often, he’ll text me or call me. That’s the type, there’s numerous of them. I can’t tell you all of them, but that’s the one that sticks in my mind.

Denice: The bad part of it is, we can’t even get thank you’s out to everybody, because we don’t know everybody.

Diana: I’ve heard that several times. Are you getting better at taking donations? Hay and....

Denice: Yes, we’re getting good...

Mike: It is a lot easier to give than to receive.

Denice: In the beginning, it was horrible. But after a while, you realize that you really do need the help. We’ll never be able to pay back everything.

Mike: There’s still people that we give a \$20, \$50 or \$100. Or we’ll go out to dinner or do something.

Diana: Yes, get out of the fire... What’s your most vivid memory of the fire?

Denice: The sight of it.

Diana: What about you?

Mike: I’ve got so many, I don’t know which one it is. The most vivid ones? Seeing the fire come over the top of the canyon wall. Seeing the dead cattle. Seeing my grandson. Denice had him out a couple days afterwards, and we had a Kubota side by side and she was going down the driveway. He’d just look out there and shake his head.

Denice: Well, because he had come out on weekends, you know, so he knew about the babies. We would watch his dad and we’d giggle whenever a cow got a little rambunctious, so very protective and stuff. So he saw all these cows and babies. I didn’t know at his age, he wasn’t quite two yet. When he came out after the fire, it seemed like he was sorta, “What’s going on here?”

Mike: Then seeing our other grandson, Melinda’s son.

Denice: He’s a year younger.

Mike: After we got back to the house (we was out of the house for three days) the wind blew, and he was playing on the kitchen floor, and it looked like he was outside playing. That's how much more dust we had after the fire.

Denice: He was crawling, and he was just black from the soot coming in the back door. We just couldn't keep it out.

Diana: Was there a lot of soot? Because at some point, they said the wind blew so hard that the dirt covered up the soot.

Mike: Some places it did, but even to this day, Diana, I'll come in to take a shower and there'll be black on the bottom of the shower.

Denice: From wherever maybe he was with the fence or stuff.

Mike: There's still a lot of soot.

Diana: How is your grass doing?

Mike: Well, like I tell people, it looks great at 70 mph down the road. But you get out on it, and it's not that great. The sand hills are terrible and weedy as all get out. The bottom lands, the grass is thin. Our buffalo grass and side oats grama grass that is native to this area, it is hurt bad. The big blue, low blue and Indian grass all those that has deeper roots, are coming on. But it's thin. It was so hot it burnt the roots.

Diana: You have lived in this area your whole life, and you've seen wildfires before. How does this compare, even to a controlled burn. Is there anything you can match up?

Denice: I can't compare it to anything. I can remember when I first came here; if there was a fire, we just took wet gunnysacks and shovels and...

Mike: And a spray rig.

Denice: And a spray rig. But this was unbelievable.

Mike: I've been through some hellish fires, but there was nothing you could do. The only thing you could do was go to the house and control that and save people's homes. We never lost homes from grass fires in Clark County before.

Diana: Who were some of the people or agencies that helped you most? I think you've talked about a lot of them, but going forward. Did you take advantage of the community foundation having an application and the KLA to help?

Mike: We took advantage of those right off the bat.

Denice: The Working Ranch.

Mike: Tyler Woolfolk called and said, "You're a member of the Working Ranch Association. You don't have to be... I'm sending you an application to that." Within a few days...

Denice: We got financial help from them.

Mike: My sister Cheryl from Colorado came out. She doesn't have any family or anything like that. She gave us a little bit of money. But no, we took advantage of everything that we could take advantage of. You asked if we came into the Christian Church, really, we didn't.

Diana: You didn't have time.

Denice: We didn't really have time, and then too, what I said about the fraternity boys being there. Over the weekend, Sally Shattuck brought out meals and basically fed those guys in the evening. She brought out meals two days in a row for about 20 people. But she wasn't the only one, there were lots of people. So we didn't have a need to do that. I did feel good kind of towards the end. I was able to go in and help Kelly sometimes when the Christian Church had to close up their camp for food. Then it was kind of a community sort of thing; I was able to help with some of it.

Diana: Kind of a community volunteer?

Diana: Especially when Kelly was coordinating the volunteers while Holly was gone.

Mike: What was more impressive to me than anything in the whole food deal was, that people forgot about their differences. People wasn't bickering at each other anymore.

Diana: They didn't have time.

Mike: They worked together.

Denice: It is just a different sense.

Mike: I don't think people have come back to that yet. I know that I haven't, and I don't think anybody else has come back to it.

Denice: Everybody still wants to help everybody.

Diana: Do you think that is an emotional response to the whole thing? The way people are coping with the fire?

Denice: Yes. I do.

Diana: So, of the stuff you lost. What do you miss most?

Denice: The cows and the babies and the grass.

Diana: Can you perceive anything positive that has come from the fire?

Mike: Yes. People get along better. We're going to have new fences, or 97% of it. My daughter-in-law, Kelly, has made the comment that our grandkids aren't going to learn how to repair fence.

Denice: They're going to be lazy.

Mike: But no, there have been a lot of positive things. People coming in and everybody working together has been positive.

Denice: We've made a heck of a lot of friends. Actually, I have friends that I've had pretty much my whole life that are from Spearville, and they have been down as a couple, but more him than his wife. But every time he came, she sent food, like two or three fried chickens. Things for the freezer, like I said, we couldn't begin to even name or mention the ways that people have helped us. They themselves had tragedy in their family, and she said, "This is a drop in the bucket of paybacks for us." I said, "I know, I've thought we'll never be able to pay back enough to other people in need compared to what we've received."

Diana: Do you think there's more of a physical or financial toll from the fire?

Mike: Financial.

Diana: Do you think it's going to last a while?

Mike: We'll get along okay this year. But the next several years, it's going to be a burden. It is going to be very difficult, because we haven't had good prices. We pay so much for every thing we buy, and what we receive has been very low. It's going to be financial. I hate to say that, but it is going to be a financial burden for several years, with the price of fences and everything like that, and to replace equipment. You know, we had insurance, but insurance don't replace what you had.

Diana: Did you have all the things you lost covered?

Mike: Ninety percent of it. The tractors, the stock trailers wasn't covered, the riding lawnmowers at the house.

Denice: We lost two good riding lawn mowers. My favorite!

Mike: You know, just little things like that, you don't think about that type of stuff. Everything else was covered, but not enough. If you're going to have to replace something, you want to replace your junk with something better. You don't want somebody else's junk headache.

Diana: There's no farm sale to go to now to replace stuff.

Mike: We bought a lot on Big Iron.

Diana: So, what can you do or have you done to prepare for a future fire or another type of disaster? Have you made plans?

Mike: Truthfully, we haven't done anything, because we're still coping with this one.

Denice: I don't know what we would do differently. I don't know. It seems like when God decided He was going to start a fire that day, He did. Sometimes, we're not going to be able to prepare for things.

Mike: I don't know how to really answer that question. Maybe other people can answer that, but you know, where we live at, we can't make fire guards in the grass, because we're around sand and it would blow away. It is heartbreaking to see all the trees that's...

Denice: I think that one thing, though, all of the fences now are metal.

Mike: Well, not all of them.

Denice: There aren't very many wooden fence posts.

Mike: Mostly pipe and t-posts.

Diana: You didn't put any creosote in?

Mike: We put a little bit in when we had volunteer people. What we're paying to put in, we're putting back in with pipe.

Denice: But if that counts as looking to the future, if it ever happens again. I guess that counts.

Mike: What does other people say to that one?

Diana: I had one guy tell me that he would always have wheat field on the west side of his house, because he thought the wheat field saved his house. There's another who said they were going to go through and make sure that they had all of their personal papers and things like grandma's quilt, or things that they would want to save... But basically, people said...

Mike: Where we're living at, we can't have a wheat field. That's great to say that right now, but we all become lackidassical in that we want to show grandma's quilt or...

Denice: When we first moved into that house, it was Mike's grandparents' house. There was never grass in the yard, so Mike was bound and determined that we were going to have grass. We were going to have a yard. So I'm thinking we're going to do buffalo grass and that kind of thing, but no, we're having tall fescue. Well, I moped and groaned and complained about that, but him and Alex Stapleton put a sprinkling system in around the house and he planted that grass and he's babied that grass around. I just thought, oh, you have to mow it all the time and I just complained and moaned and groaned about that. But that tall fescue and that sprinkler system saved our house. So I guess we were already prepared more than we realized.

Diana: So what about the community? How prepared do you think we really were? Like emergency fire...

Mike: I really think our fire department is... all three fire departments in the county, is prepared for the normal fire. That was not a normal fire, and we might not see that type of fire again. I hope we don't, but I think that we was prepared. Even the Anderson Creek fire wasn't as bad a fire as this one. You know, we go out and help our neighboring counties and people comes in and helps us.

Denice: Even beyond the fire department, I think everybody... I felt like everybody did an excellent job. I'm not sure that there could be much more improvement. But I don't know, because I'm just speaking from our experience.

Diana: Did you have a lot of, besides the tractors, you had people out on their tractors, did you have spray rigs over in that part of the county? Or was it just moving too fast?

Mike: It was moving too fast, they couldn't keep up. Yes, there were spray rigs, like I said, over at Gardiner's and in that, and Comanche County was there. By the time it got to our house, they were in Englewood trying to save houses in town. They couldn't be at every house. But there was no way to get a spray rig to every place that needed one that day. That many miles of fence, that many miles of fire.

Diana: Did you see fire all night?

Mike: Yes.

Diana: And then the next day, was there fire close to you? Or was it mainly just...

Denice: There were patches when I came home. You could see fires burning in lots of different places around, patches.

Mike: There was some to the west of us that were still burning, not very much to the south, because it was already burned out. We could see fire over here that burned the next day, but it was just patches that when the wind changed that hadn't burned that would burn again.

Diana: Did you see the task force that came to help?

Mike: We saw them.

Diana: Were they out in your area?

Mike: Basically they didn't come to our area, because we didn't need them.

Diana: You were done.

Mike: We saw the Blackhawk or whatever fly over. They did put out some of it and stuff like that. We did call Englewood and say... Even when I'm on the fire department, I called and said, "Would somebody bring out the tanker tonight and put these trees out that I can't get out with a garden hose."

Denice: We worked with it. Between Kelly and I, we worked a day and a half on it.

Mike: And I said, "I don't want you coming until you've rested."

Denice: But it was simple things, like there was a patch of grass by the fence along where you walk to get into the house that would not die. I mean, I went out and put water on that thing. I didn't have a shovel or a hoe at the beginning, and then by the time got there, then I just used branches to kind of stir it, but there was little hot spots that would come up right there, even though there was nothing obvious left to burn. You still worried about it. You still thought you needed to get it out.

Diana: Do you think the volunteers or all the people who came to help pushed you into doing something, instead of sitting and grieving what you had lost?

Denice: Yes.

Mike: As I told one group of people that brought stuff in, they said, "How does this affect you?"

I said, "If it hadn't been for all you guys coming in here, we'd have our heads down kicking rocks. But with you guys bringing all this stuff in here, donations, hay and everything, we can hold our heads up high and be proud.

Denice: And keep trying.

Mike: That's what I told one person.

Denice: It was a big help.

Mike: I don't know if it pushed us, because we had the will to do something, but when people show up...

Denice: You appreciated even the person who could not physically or any other way do something, but they wanted to see you and tell you, "I care." All of those things were important to me, anyway. We had that. We would have been really crying around if we hadn't had... we didn't have time to cry then. We've got time to cry now.

Mike: Well, we did cry.

Denice: Yes, we did. But you didn't stand around. It didn't last long.

Mike: It didn't last long. When you see a dead armadillo...

Denice: I'd been looking for that guy.

Diana: You had a lot of cattle, but did you also see a lot of wildlife?

Denice: Yes.

Mike: The first morning after the fire, we don't have very many pheasants, but there was this pheasant walking around on the burnt ground. Off to the distance, we could see a deer standing on the hill. I didn't personally see any dead wildlife as I was running around in the pasture.

Denice: I didn't either.

Mike: I know other people said they did. Maybe I wasn't looking hard enough, but I do know that some of them that I've seen now, their ears was burned and...

Denice: That probably also helped promote the fire a little bit, because they were trying to run and maybe caught on fire. They were trying to run to save themselves; that probably didn't help anything either.

Diana: Do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd like to include?

Mike: I think I've talked enough.

Denice: I'm just thankful to God that we're okay and we had all the help that we had and still have.

Mike: I don't know about a lot of other people, but it was hard to sleep for a number of nights.

Diana: Oh, how about the smoke smell. Did it stay around for a long time?

Denice: Yes.

Diana: Can you still kind of smell it?

Mike: You can still sense it. Yes.

Denice: Maybe it depends on the atmosphere or something like that, but every once in a while you get a whiff of smoke.

Diana: Every day, that first couple of weeks, a little bit different?

Mike: Yes. There were a lot of days when the kids were here working, and we just called and told them to go to the house. The wind was blowing so hard and the sand was blowing and just beating them to death.

Denice: Really, the first day when the wind came up so badly, the next day, there was nothing in the sand hills to hold anything down. It was so dirty that you couldn't see down the highway on Highway 160 heading south to Englewood. You couldn't see anything. I thought that was the way things were going to be, but fortunately we didn't have very many more days like that.

Mike: That one day that we had a whole bunch of people at some farmhouse, Jim Ault and his boys was there, we was sitting at the house eating dinner and the sheriff's car pulled up. I looked out and it was Wally Long, and I said, "They're delivering our foreclosure papers." Wally just came up to the house and said, "Can I do anything? Can I help?"

He came out a couple days later and worked. He brought out his trailer, he was just going around to places. I didn't know Wally at that time. I knew of him, but I didn't know him. But I became very good friends with him and he and Melinda became like "this" because they worked together. They got to know each other really well.

Diana: So how do you feel now? It's kind of down the way, you've kind of got some cattle re-bought, the grass is coming up, and you'll plant wheat... Do you feel like you're stronger? Holding your head above water?

Denice: I will say this. At this point, I wish we were 45 instead of 65. That makes a difference in how we feel, I suppose.

Mike: Every day's a new day, Diana. Some days I'm really pumped up high and some days I try not to be low, I try to pump myself back up. But some days it is tough. It is hard to be...

Denice: And what do we want? What do we want to do? Do we want to throw in the towel at this point? It probably would have been easy enough, but we have a son and a grandson and a

daughter-in-law living here. Therefore, it makes it a little bit harder to say, “We’re done.” No, we’re not going to do that, and besides that, what else would we do?

Mike: But on those days where we feel like we’re just a little bit low, we talk to each other or I call Bernie Smith or David Clawson.

Denice: Give each other pep-talks, because they’re in the same boat. We’re not alone, that’s the thing.

Mike: Some days when I talk to Bernie, we’re both down, but we pump each other back up, because we know we’ve got to. We maybe lie just a little bit and say it’s going to get better.