

Diane: Today is February 28, 2018. What is your name?

Deb: My name is Debbie Pearce.

Dan: Mine is Daniel Pearce.

Diane: And where do you live?

Deb: We live in Protection; we work in Ashland.

Diane: Okay, what is your occupation?

Deb: My occupation is Transportation Director for USD 220, and I'm also an EMT on Clark County EMS and I am affiliated with the Ashland Fire Department.

Dan: I'm a Street Superintendent for the City of Ashland. I'm on the Ashland Fire Department and Clark County EMS.

Diane: Okay. And how old are you?

Dan: I'm 65.

Deb: I'm 58.

Diane: Now, when did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as "the fire?" And, where were you?

Deb: We were in Dodge City.

Dan: I had a dentist appointment.

Deb: It was just right about noon and we were headed south on 14th street out of town. Dodge City was beginning to fight a fire down by the DC race track.

Dan: It started at the race track from a burn. A day or so before, they burned some trees and thought they had them out. It had jumped Highway 56 going west and was getting into the homes up in there; they were getting ready to shut the highway down.

Deb: I had received a call at that same time from Jenny Giles Betschart asking if I knew where the fire was, because the valley where they farm and ranch was filling up with smoke. I told her I didn't know because we were at Dodge City at that time, but I would make some phone calls and call her back.

Diana: So, did you get a page or something that told you about the fire?

Deb: We had not received an actual page at that time, but we did shortly after that. I ended up calling Fire Chief David Redger and asking him. He told me that they were getting ready to roll down southwest of Englewood, down around Frosty Ediger's place. So I called Betscharts back and told them that the wind was in that direction and it was probably coming from there. In the meantime, I called my superintendent (Jaime Wettig) at Ashland schools and talked to him about making sure that he kept track of the fire. I was going to

pick up a student that we have in Dodge City that was attending Youthville and bring him home in my private vehicle, so I didn't have to make a second trip.

Dan: The wind was terrible.

Diana: Did you have trouble? Once you got out of Dodge, coming back, did you run into any smoke or fire on the road?

Dan: After we got out of Dodge? We got through that intersection. They were shutting that intersection down south of Dodge just as we were leaving. We were probably about the last vehicle to get out to go south on 283. We could see the smoke in the south, and about that time my phone rang and Francis Young was at the firehouse. He said, "Where are you at?" And I told him. He said, "I'll get your gear and I will meet you up on the pasture road."

Deb: On the pasture road, up towards Minneola?

Dan: For the fire up there.

Diana: So, what truck?

Dan: He was in the old '56.

Diana: Okay. And just you and Francis on that truck?

Dan: Yes.

Diana: Is that a big truck? How many gallons?

Dan: It was one of our big trucks at that time. It carried 750 gallons on it.

Diana: So you went to help Minneola with that fire?

Dan: To meet him up there, yes.

Deb: To meet him on the pasture road. By the time we got to Minneola, I had placed a call to Millie Fudge who was the Emergency Preparedness and the EMS Director and asked her if they had shut down any highways yet because we knew that the fire had advanced into southwest of Englewood, was moving towards Englewood, and they were getting ready to evacuate Englewood. I made that call and she said, "Not yet." So we got to Minneola and came south to the wind towers and tried to go back to the east to catch into the pasture road, but the fire – I was driving, but the fire was everywhere right in there.

Dan: It was across – we couldn't go south, it was across every road at that time. Every time we turned around there was another fire we were going through.

Diana: So did you have trouble meeting up with Francis?

Dan: Well, we figured out the only way we were going to get through was to go back to the highway if they hadn't shut the highway off.

Deb: Because, if you don't get to the pasture road up there, there are no other roads.

Dan: So, we called Clark County Dispatch, and she said no, they had not closed the road yet. I said, "Well, good, we're coming through." She said, "It's still open at this time." So, we went around into Ashland and I picked up #55 with Don White and Russ Hensley. We went up north to catch up with Francis up there on the pasture road and that's where I hooked up with him.

Diana: What is #55?

Dan: That's our support vehicle. It's got a 6-man cab. We carry extra gear in it, extra people. It's our rescue truck.

Diana: Okay. So then when you got up there, you all climbed on #56?

Dan: I climbed on the back of #56 with Francis and those two stayed in #55 until we joined up with three of the Minneola trucks. We were just on the other side of the rock house (a local landmark) and we thought, "Well, we'll try to make a stand. This road's gonna make kind of a fire break if it doesn't jump it." We started heading east down this fire line that was going to the north of us, northeast. We got part way down in this draw and that wind switched and it almost came over the top of us. We just circled around and got back up to the pasture road and realized, you know, that this was a big deal. Then we got a call that said we needed to go back to Ashland because it was coming into Ashland. Shortly after that, the call came through that there was a fire on the Hermann Ranch, so we didn't even know if we could beat it to get back into Ashland.

Diana: So, where's the Hermann Ranch from where you were at? Is it still west and south of where you were at?

Dan: Yeah, it was probably about five or six miles south and back to the west.

Diana: Was that fire coming from the northeast to northwest?

Dan: It was coming from the southwest.

Diana: It was coming from the southwest. It was the one that was coming from Englewood?

Dan: Yeah, that was the one. It had just got started, I think, when the call came in. And then the wind switched shortly after that. It had went northeast far enough that it actually joined that Minneola fire and made a solid fire line from there clear down into where the Englewood fire was. We knew we had to get back, because we know it was coming in because Dave said, "You've got to get to Ashland. This fire's coming in."

Diana: So, where were the Minneola guys? Were they still up north?

Dan: Yes. We told them that we had to leave and they said they understood. They turned back north to get on the other side, on the north side of that fire line. That was the last time we saw them that day.

Deb: I think they went from north down south, across the lake and down towards the Giles Ranch.

Diana: So, what kind of fire were you seeing? And how was it behaving?

Dan: It was wild. There was at least 40-foot flames coming through there, on the initial run, and the fire line behind it was just solid. I mean, there was no break in it. I've been on the fire department a lot of years, and I

was over at Medicine Lodge on the Anderson Creek fire. Actually, this was just mind boggling compared to the Anderson Creek. I mean, we were in for it – this was not gonna be good.

Diana: So was there a lot of smoke? Was it dark smoke? Or light?

Dan: Yeah. When you got into the smoke, you couldn't see in front of your face it was so thick. Francis and I, we got back. We got to Ashland. On our way in we passed Dave Bouziden, who was in a tractor and disk. He was on the east side of the road and he was disking. We drove by and we looked at each other and said, "He don't have a big enough disk." We got on into town, and the fire wasn't there yet but the smoke was so thick you couldn't see. Well, Francis and I got out of #56, and #55 was back at that time, so we went towards Englewood to try to find where the fire line was to see just what we were getting into.

Diana: On the highway? How were you going?

Dan: We took the highway to – we went approximately four miles west and then we turned back south. By the time we went back south, probably three miles, and we realized the fire had already went through in front of us. So we circled around and went around the section and figured out that this thing was already going through; this was the secondary fire back in here, the main part was still ahead of us; that's when we heard the trucks trying to outrun the fire getting into the Gardiner Ranch. So we went back to town, we knew that Ashland was in trouble.

Diana: Okay, so, while he's up here fighting the fire north of town, you made it back to Ashland and what are you up to?

Deb: When I let him off at the firehouse, I was already in talking to the USD 220 Superintendent at that time and we were going into evacuation modes and making sure that parents were picking up their kids. We did not run buses to the west. We did not run buses to the north. Parents either had somebody, a teacher or somebody that was in charge of their kids, or they were making it in to pick up their kids. About that time, I got a call from Ashland Hospital. Well, actually it came from Jason Endicott, the grade school principal. He said, "Where are you? Ashland hospital is trying to locate you and they need our special-needs bus to evacuate." So, I went and got the special-needs bus out and I happened to see Khrista Branson, who was an aide at our grade school. She helps our special-needs child in the wheelchair, and she was used to using the belts. So I asked her what she was doing and she said, "I guess I'm going with you." So, we met up down at the Ashland hospital. We also took our small 24-passenger bus down there and they loaded the walking people onto it, plus their van. Then they put wheelchair people into their wheelchair van. We started loading with the help of the nurses, Erin Fast, and several of the others were right there, started loading wheelchairs up on a ramp and then we picked the people up and we would belt them into the seats. We'd pick them up and move them to a seat. Until we had – I think we had transferred 18 people in that bus who were all with wheelchairs. We'd fold up the wheelchairs and started stacking them. The ones that we could not move out of the wheelchair, we secured. I had four sets of securement straps to secure those people. Once that was done, Dr. Brianne Clark was there and we were all ready to move; they had decided to move us to Buffalo, Oklahoma.

Diana: So, both of your vehicles, the 24-passenger and the special-needs bus, went to Buffalo?

Deb: The 24-passenger bus ended up evacuating to Coldwater with the people that could walk. The wheelchair non-ambulatory people went to Buffalo with Khrista and me.

Diana: And did you have them – had you begun unloading them?

Deb: We transferred to Buffalo. We could see the fire line coming in there and south of Ashland, all the way to Buffalo. And we got everybody into the hospital and into rooms with the help of the Buffalo Hospital and nurses and the fire was starting to move towards Buffalo because of the wind shift. They decided to evacuate Buffalo. So, we ended up loading everybody again.

Diana: Do you remember what time that was?

Deb: I'm thinking it was around 7 or 8 p.m. It may have been later.

Diana: It was earlier.

Deb: I don't remember the time.

Diana: It was earlier, because we were there when they were evacuating, and it was probably 6 p.m.

Deb: I know it got dark in a hurry and we were also – once we got our patients loaded, we had two aides from the Buffalo hospital on with us. They took care of the patients because we also added Buffalo people. I had a full bus load.

Diana: How many can you carry on your special-needs vehicle?

Deb: It's a 42-passenger with four wheelchair access. So we had a full bus. We didn't have them three to a seat. I think two or three of them we did, but for the most part we were full. Then, by that time Buffalo had gotten out their activity bus, and we'd moved over to the nursing home and helped them load the ambulatory people onto their activity bus. It was dark. I'm not sure what time it was, but by that time they had decided we were evacuating to Woodward.

Diana: And they decided that was far enough – that you'd be secure there?

Deb: Yes, so we evacuated to Woodward and we could see fire line all the way to Woodward. We got into Woodward and transferred the patients to a nursing home in the southeast part of Woodward and helped them unload. Then we unloaded the Buffalo patients there that were not hospital patients. The nursing home patients were unloaded there. From there, we went to the Woodward hospital and unloaded our patients and Buffalo's hospital patients that we had on our bus.

Diana: So, they had room enough at that time, at both the nursing home and the hospital?

Deb: They made room. There were people everywhere in that little nursing home and the hospital. I cannot say enough about Woodward hospital and nursing home. They did a ...

Diana: Very accommodating?

Deb: They were very accommodating and they did an excellent job.

Diana: So did you get a meal? Do you remember eating?

Deb: Um, I don't remember eating, honestly. I do remember that Khrista and I, we knew that we were gonna spend the night there at the hospital. They said they had a couple of rooms for us, they had showers and stuff, so we went to the local Wal-Mart and bought some clean clothes and some shampoo and the Woodward

hospital supplied us a bed. I just remember getting out of the shower and looking my watch and it was midnight. I had not talked to Dan since I let him off.

Diana: So, you didn't know where he was or anything?

Deb: No.

Diana: And he probably didn't know where you were?

Deb: No, neither one of us.

Diana: Did he even know that you were helping the hospital?

Dan: Not at that time.

Deb: I don't think so. Not at that time. We finally talked to each other about 1:30 that morning.

Diana: So were you in the fire station by then? Were you still out on a truck?

Dan: I was still out on a truck.

Diana: Do you know where you were? Were you in town?

Dan: At that time, we were out on top of a hill watching Ashland sit in the middle of a fire ring. I didn't have a camera. I couldn't take a picture.

Deb: Which side of town were you on?

Dan: Don White and I were in Truck 56, and we were on the west side of the fire line from the landfill to the highway and across. We'd made a decision that the fire wasn't going to get into Ashland because the new hospital was on the east side of that fire line and a farmer had been out there. Mike Harden had disked all around the west side of that hospital, so that made a good fire break. But we decided we weren't gonna let it get to there. So he and I sat on that fire line and ran it. The truck was halfway broke down but we made it work, barely. We couldn't leave very far from town; it wasn't that safe. So, we stayed on it, running that fire line back and forth.

Diana: Did you put out some telephone poles or line poles?

Dan: We were about on our third trip back for water and we'd just watered up the fire station and we were heading back out on the truck route, which was on the west side of town in between there and the hospital, and a city employee flagged us down. He said, "I need you guys now." I said, "What have you got?" He says, "Our electric poles coming into town, supplying the town, they're all on fire and we're gonna lose power in town."

Diana: So, where is that? Is that by the dump? Go down that road?

Dan: Yeah, it's one mile west of 160, one mile south to the – I can't think of what that road's called.

Diana: The dump road is County U.

Dan: It goes west by the dump. County Road U. So we crippled that old truck down through there, three miles. We couldn't see, hardly, in front of the truck for the smoke. We got down there and there was fire on both sides of the road. The tree rows were all on fire. We got down there and found the electric poles and there were six of them that were totally engulfed. We crept down the ditch and put out all the poles. A couple of them, they were on the back side of the fence and we couldn't get through, so I halfway crawled up two or three of the poles on the back side and wet my gloves so I could pat this fire out. But we got those poles out and we kept electricity coming into town to keep the pumps running.

Diana: So, where does that line come from?

Dan: It comes from Minneola, down 283, and then it turns on Old 160 and comes back east into town.

Diana: And there hadn't been any fire around where it was, except before it got to town here?

Dan: It wasn't too far north because that wind switched.

Diana: Yes, before it got that far up here.

Dan: But it was burned all the way; 283 to over there and north of Englewood.

Diana: You had several problems, with like the steering or something on the truck?

Dan: Yes, it had blown a power-steering line. And of course, you know we couldn't find one, so we just manhandled it. It was arm-strong steering all night long with that thing because we couldn't go very fast because it would go to shimmying. If you got brave you could almost go 30 mph before it'd start shimmying off the road.

Diana: So you mainly stayed up, down that truck line there, from going back and forth from the firehouse then? How far south did you go?

Deb: At one time he went up towards Dave Bouziden's.

Dan: Yeah, that was before because she asked where I was when I finally talked to you. When we got back the first time, after we realized that Ashland was in trouble, the page came through that Dave Bouziden's house was on fire, which was two miles north of town. The smoke was so thick, we got in #56 again and we started north; we could not see to stay in the road. So I drove with the door open and actually drove on the side of the shoulder so I could see where I was because the smoke was so thick coming through there. It took us forever it seemed like to get out there, because you just had to crawl. You could not see anything. We got there at Dave Bouziden's and the north side of his house was on fire. It had just come through the roof. But that wind was blowing so hard, there was nothing we could do. We got on the north side of it, but even at the right angle, the water just blew away. So we knew we were fighting a worthless cause. I had another truck come up, but we just didn't have the water supply or the right – for that situation we didn't have the right equipment at the right place because the fire department was so strung out.

Diana: It wasn't only the fire, it was also the wind that was keeping it from being able to attack. Okay, tell me what kind of gear you were wearing.

Dan: We were in full bunker gear.

Diana: And how were you protecting yourself from breathing the smoke?

Dan: Just have the Nomex up over your face and your nose.

Diana: So you had most of the gear on? Did you have the goggles and helmet?

Dan: Yeah, we had everything on, except for the air packs because air packs wouldn't have worked in this situation

Diana: Well, you didn't have any air packs; you didn't have any on that truck, did you?

Dan: No, we didn't have any on that truck.

Diana: So, did you stay in the heavy gear most of the night? At any time did you wear the wildfire gear?

Dan: No, we just stayed in the bunker gear because that kind of a fire, the wildfire gear was not good enough.

Diana: You needed the coverage from the heat and stuff?

Dan: You needed that big insulated coat to keep that off of you.

Diana: Did you notice when the temperature changed?

Dan: Yes. We knew when the temperature changed. I don't remember just what time it was. It was after dark. It didn't change a lot, but it did drop off several degrees, enough that you could really feel it.

Diana: So, during the time that you were going back and forth to the firehouse, was there anybody bringing in food? Did you get to eat?

Dan: Not at that time. There was stuff starting to come in, but after that, we were never back in the firehouse long enough. We could maybe grab a cracker or two and try to make headway of where we were gonna try and go next, because I mean, there was just fire everywhere.

Diana: So, did you get to take off and maybe get some down time and go to bed, or anything like that?

Dan: I was fully geared up for 18 hours before I really had a chance to take anything off. Like I said, when we were refilling, that gave you, give or take, five minutes to get filled up, so you had a little break there. But most of the time, we were just on the go.

Diana: At some point did we retire that old #56 and not take it out anymore?

Dan: That was its last fire. We kind of had to laugh, it had the two oldest firemen on the oldest truck on the biggest fire. Don and I both laughed about that. Said, "Boy, isn't this a crew?"

Diana: So, was the sun coming up? Could you still see fire around town when the sun came up?

Dan: Yeah, it was – we were sitting up there on the hill west of town. We'd pretty well had that fire line out. We weren't worried about it jumping, but we were up there and I told Don, "There's a sight you'll probably never see again." And of course, it wasn't actually a pure circle, but from where we were sitting, the entire town was encircled by fire. I wished I'd had a camera.

Diana: Yes, that would have been good. So, the next day – oh, when were the first volunteers from other places that you knew were there? Did anybody that you would see come in during the night, like the guys from Greeley County?

Dan: That was the next day when we started seeing those people coming in. We knew they were coming because they said they'd call for help. But there was so much fire at that time, all the mutual aid companies, were all out fighting their own fire. Because we found out there were fires in Reno County and every little district had their big fire. You know, we're kind of used to fighting a big fire and waiting for the cavalry to come over the hill and help us. All the cavalry was tied up. So, we basically had no help for over 18 hours. We were entirely on our own.

Diana: So, then once, like say noon on Tuesday, did you get another plan going? Or did you have a meeting? Did everybody know what they were doing? Were you still out fighting fire in different parts?

Dan: Everybody was still coming, fighting fire. A truck would come in and the guys would grab something to eat and something to drink, and we'd talk a little bit about what was going on and where we were going next.

Diana: Was there anybody in charge at the firehouse that was kind of stationed there? Or were you mainly going off of the incident management control center?

Dan: Basically we were going off that, because the people in the firehouse, they were the ones, they were just keeping the food and the supplies coming.

Deb: Which was, Sherry Neier and Barbara Gillaspie and several others.

Diana: On Tuesday?

Dan: There were so many there, I can't remember. Your nieces were there.

Diana: Yeah, Trishia was there, and Brittany, but they weren't there until we got back. So, let's move back to Debbie, because you're stuck in Woodward and it's Tuesday morning.

Deb: We got up Tuesday morning and we went down and had breakfast in the commissary in Woodward's hospital– they gave us a free meal – and had breakfast and waited for the nurses to let us know what our plan was for the day and what they were doing. They had chosen – Buffalo ended up transferring their patients later back to Buffalo that day. Ashland decided since the Ashland Hospital was not safe to open at that time that they were going to continue to house the patients in Woodward. We waited till – I know it was after 11:00 before they made that decision, and I had been keeping in touch with Mr. Wettig at the school and told him that as soon as we could, we would head out.

Diana: Had they called off school already?

Deb: They had called off school already. The school had transitioned into a facility to house the volunteers, or the support system coming in, all the firefighters coming in from Colorado and Kansas and Oklahoma. So, Khrista and I, after we got the word that they were going to keep the patients, we made the decision that we needed to head back north. So we headed straight north. At that time, the highway was still closed to Buffalo, so we went straight north towards Coldwater. Before I got into Coldwater, Daniel Hess, the Transportation Director for South Central School System had called me and asked me where we were at because that fire was coming in north of Protection and they were evacuating Protection. Their lift bus with their school system had quit, but the bus would run, and where was I and could I help?

I said, “Well, I’m just coming up to the junction south of Coldwater getting ready to turn west,” and I would be there as soon as I could. Khrista Branson had her own medical emergency. Her son was in ill health, and we conferred with Rick Branson, her husband, to meet us, and we were trying to figure out where that was because there were still fires out around Steve and Kelly Hazen’s and Mike and Myrna Koehen’s and west of Protection. So we ended up meeting him on County Road R. He got to Sitka and came to the north and then came back to the east and met me on County Road R, just north of the Clark County Northern Natural Pipeline Station. I let Khrista get off with him and then I went back to Protection to the nursing home.

Diana: So, did you evacuate people?

Deb: Evacuated people from Protection to Coldwater. And once I got to Coldwater, they put me on standby there and I ended up being there almost three to four hours.

Diana: So, you live in Protection?

Deb: Yes.

Diana: Did you know what your house looked like? Had you got to go home?

Deb: No. Well, I knew that the fire had not made it to Protection that day. So, yes, after waiting around and they said that they weren’t sure, but they were talking about evacuating Coldwater. So I waited around three or four hours and they had kind of – the wind had changed a little bit more and they were still worried about Protection, so they were going to keep everybody there in Coldwater. After it was safe to return back to Protection, I went on back to Protection and talked to Mr. Wettig and told him that I was just gonna leave the bus there, that way if they needed me in Coldwater or if I needed to go back to Woodward, I could. So that’s what I did. That next day then, I loaded up and got the call from Ashland and went down south and helped bring patients back.

Diana: On Wednesday. So, they were all back in. So on Tuesday, Dan, what fire truck were you on?

Dan: Tuesday, for a while, we did some fire line running with the truck to make sure everything was still good to the west of us. Then I ended up – well, the call came in that they were evacuating Protection. It was coming in from the northwest. Just shortly after that, Deb called me and said, “They’re evacuating Protection. Where are you?” I said, “Well, I’m in a truck over here, but I’m fixing to see if I can get released to go to Protection to see what is going on, to see what I can do.” I got ahold of Dave Redger and he said, “Go, we’re okay if you need to go take care of your stuff.” So, I drove on east on 160 to Protection and it was like a different world. Everything was black and still covered with smoke. But I could see the smoke to the north where it was coming in.

On the way over there, I called the Comanche County Fire Chief, Greg Ellis and he said, “Where are you guys at? What’s going on?” I told him what was what and he said, “Well, it’s coming down the creek and we can’t stop it.” We live on the north side of town just above that creek and it was going to come across us. There wasn’t any doubt. I said, “Well, I’m going to be at my house. I’m almost back into town.” He told me, “Good luck.” He said, “We’ll just do what we can do.”

Diana: So, they had all the trucks out of their barn that they took?

Dan: Yes, they were all – Comanche County and Protection; all the Comanche County trucks were out.

Deb: Protection, Coldwater and Wilmore. Greensburg was assisting them, I think.

Diana: Had the strike teams started showing up by now? The ones from Kansas? Like the one from Cowley County were one of the first ones?

Deb: Yes. Some of them were in.

Dan: Some of them started coming in that morning, but I didn't realize it at the time.

Deb: I actually didn't transfer the Ashland patients back till Thursday. They stayed two nights in Woodward.

Diana: Yeah, they did.

Dan: But, what time was it Monday night when I – did I call you or did you call me when we finally got a hold of each other?

Deb: It was 1:30 in the morning.

Dan: That's what I was thinking. We kind of had a little break and I thought, "I know they evacuated the hospital, but I don't know where my wife is. I'd better give her a call and tell her I'm still okay." I finally got a hold of her and she said, "Where are you at?" I told her and she said, "Well, I'm in Woodward right now."

Diana: So, did you fight much fire on Wednesday? Or did they start letting you have some down time on Wednesday.

Dan: We started being able to get switched off.

Diana: And did you go back and work for the City any time during the week?

Dan: I never did. I talked to Doug Graff and told him where I was at and he said, "I know where you're at. We've got everything handled." Because they were replacing poles. They had lost a lot of electric poles, and it comes through our city.

Diana: West of town?

Dan: Well, in our area that the city electricity covers. It goes north of town and it goes south a ways, then it goes west. They replaced, how many poles? Tuesday and Wednesday they replaced close to 60-some poles to keep electricity to these people's houses.

Diana: Or to restore electricity?

Dan: Yeah. He wasn't worried about me because he knew I was on the fire department.

Diana: So you were back here and then you went back down and helped pick up the...

Deb: I was back here and then came over to Ashland to see what I could do at the firehouse and there was absolutely nothing. So I ended up going up to the school. By that time, Jason Endicott had called me and said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Well, I'm waiting for them to decide when they're going to transfer patients back." And he said, "Let's grab some vans," he said, "we've got lots of water already being delivered. Let's start." So, Jamie Wettig, Jason Endicott and myself – I drove them around because I know the country. I

had a new superintendent from out of the area, he didn't know how to get to where, and honestly, Jason doesn't go out to the country a lot. I know all the country roads because I grew up here and know all the bus routes, and I knew where everybody lived. So, we started, headed north and started checking on all of our students and their families. We delivered water and food, and crackers, and anything we could take and started seeing what they needed. We went to Brandon and Heather Grigsby's and they have quite a story to tell. Then we went to Jenny and Shane Betschart's, and to Katie and Brett Shaw. Of course, by that time they had transitioned into Ashland to his parents' house.

Diana: But were they already in cleanup mode when you were out there?

Deb: No. What they were doing was, they had so many cattle, so many cows that were still with calves. They had a vet and game wardens out there and they were checking those cows to see if there were any viable calves, and putting animals down. They had one barn that did not burn and we unloaded lots of water there. We headed from there over towards Ashland Feeders to the east where we have ten kids, ten school children, and to see what their needs were. We talked with the feedlot manager. We just visited with him and found out that he and his wife had lost their house and we went on over to John and Lisa Moore's and Paul Harden's, and made a circle that direction. We went back towards Ashland, and ended up reloading the van and went towards Englewood.

Diana: All in one day?

Deb: All in one day and we continued to do that for several days.

Diana: Keep making the same circle, or going different places?

Deb: Going different directions and trying to make sure that we touched base with all of our families in the Englewood area and up north and south of Sitka, south of Ashland and south of Sitka.

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

Deb: Mine – I think it was early on and knowing that there was no way to get down that pasture road to meet that fire truck, having to go clear back to the highway. People do not realize that out in this country, we have lots of canyons. We are not the typical flat Kansas area and there are only a few roads that go across. There's only – to my knowledge, there's only really three roads that come off the pasture road to the west, from Ashland north and Minneola, and we couldn't get through there. I think that's my most vivid memory. That, and seeing the fire line, knowing that the fire line was from Ashland, to Buffalo, to Fort Supply.

Diana: What's your most vivid memory?

Dan: That it was just so big, that it covered such an immense area and was so quick. When you realize there's 30-40 miles of fire line. You know, I'm used to seeing – we've had ten miles of fire line. I've been on some fires over in Comanche County where it was a 20-mile fire line. But that was nothing. This was, everywhere you looked was fire!

Diana: So, you've both been around the fire department for a long time. You've lived in this area and you've known about grass fires and also about burns and prescribed burns where they're going to go set fires. Is there any way to compare those types of things to this fire?

Dan: No.

Deb: No. I don't think so. The only comparison is, there just wasn't enough manpower and not enough trucks to begin with. With 70 mile-an-hour winds, there was just not any way to stop this thing. There was not enough manpower and not enough trucks.

Dan: We had strike team guys – this was two or three days on later, and even a week later. They told us that – they said, “You guys have got nothing to feel bad about.” They said, “We don't know anybody that could have handled this, this type of fire like you have. You guys had a real fire. You've got nothing to be ashamed of because we don't know of anybody that could have handled this any better.” They said, “You know, if you have 60 trucks in a row lined up, this fire would have overwhelmed them.” They said they learned a lot. Really nice, really nice people. Just super.

Deb: Some of those guys that came out of Colorado, I remember the guys talking about how they were amazed that our guys would ride out on the front or the back of the trucks and fight fire. Out there where they fight forest fires, they get off and walk. They pull real lines and walk, you know. But, I remember Bill Neier talking about these guys. He said that you give them a chainsaw and they know how to take a tree down that's on fire. He said they can take it in a hurry.

Diana: So, who were some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful during the fire, that you are aware of?

Deb: Fire, EMS, Emergency Preparedness, the church groups, the school.

Dan: The support we got from everybody is just overwhelming.

Deb: The school kicked in and started cooking meals. They housed all the firefighters. They provided showers and clean towels and whatever they could do. The school really stepped in.

Dan: That was one comment I got. These guys said, “We've never really had accommodations like we had here.” He said, “This town went above and beyond.” They said they were so impressed.

Deb: They fed them three meals a day, you know, whoever walked in, the families that were displaced and the ones that were still trying to, you know, came to town to eat. It was a community place for people to come and talk and hug. The community support was there.

Diana: So, did you volunteer at the school, or at the camp after that main week with they had volunteers here?

Deb: I did volunteer at the school when I kind of got back in, and during that week that we were out. Then we went into the week of spring break after that. So, I continued driving a van and taking water and disbursing things, and figuring out who needed things, and getting it to those families out in the country.

Diana: Did you help down at the camp?

Deb: I did help down at the camp. I didn't do a lot except in the evenings because I was busy during the day. But I did help down there after the fire was out and the crews starting coming in to clean up, like tear down fence, and help clean up houses, and that kind of stuff. The school let me use a school bus and I started hauling crews out, because I know where everybody lives and where their land is. So, I would talk with – Holly Fast was in charge of that. She would call me and tell me that we were going to take two or three crews and I'd make one circle with a school bus and I'd drop them off. I might go towards the Englewood area, or I might go towards Protection and north of Ashland.

We had several big crews come in from Michigan and Minnesota. We had a big crew and the school allowed me to use the activity bus and take them so they could get – they were just seeing pieces of it, and so we took them in a circle and let them see just how big this was. We also took them up towards the Basin, because these kids had never seen buffalo and things like that, so we did a few things like that. Jesse Luckie came in and went with us. He's owns the Snake Creek Ranch where they had fire devastation and he had some of these kids down there working with him. We both had the same idea and so we made it happen. They were here one weekend. They were just one group. I don't know how many groups of people came in. The volunteer people that came from all over the United States, the hay and everything that came in afterwards is just...

Diana: So, Dan, when did you go back to work for the City? Like the next week?

Dan: I think I actually went to work that Friday. I think I went in to see where the guys were and how things were doing there. I was there for a while and then I ended up back home on a truck; we were doing spot runs to different places. You know, well, we got another one broke out here. Doing a lot of mop up and clean up.

Deb: The guys doing that, they would take out the support fire trucks and support fire fighters out to the area, too.

Diana: Kind of like a guide?

Deb: Yes, to get them in there, and how to maneuver back to where they needed to go. They were doing things like that, too.

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

Dan: I think the community is a lot closer. It just kind of made a bonding for everybody because it affected everybody. We're so lucky that we didn't lose anybody from this county. Everybody – we all survived.

Deb: We had no loss of life from our county.

Diana: And no major injuries?

Deb: The only injury and death that happened was in this county was an out-of-state trucker that got over on Highway 34; he had come up from the south and got caught in that fire, and ultimately lost his life. There were two or three vehicles. I think he was probably trying to turn around and the smoke was so thick he ended up jackknifing his truck and had two vehicles, or was it three that hit his truck?

Diana: At least two. There were three vehicles there, but only two of them were in the accident.

Deb: Hit, ran into the trailer of the truck. Those people were injured and the ambulance was pretty fast out there.

Diana: Pretty close. Were they dispatched or were they on their way back from ...?

Deb: No, that wasn't – the first ambulance was on the way to Pratt, a transfer, when all this really blew up. The second ambulance was dispatched out there. The first ambulance ended up trying to go across country and ended up out in a wheat field because the fire was going to overcome them.

Diana: So out of all of this, there was physical, there was financial, and there was emotional upheaval. Which do you think affected people more, or that has affected you? I mean, is it more of a physical thing or a financial?

Deb: Just looking at the community! I mean, Dan and I, as a couple and everything, on our behalf, we were not affected. We were not – I think emotionally more for me, because I know all the people that lost their homes, and I know – I heard all of these stories of how close some of them came to losing their life.

Dan: And it's pretty amazing, the stories.

Deb: I think so. I think the emotional part of it, and the fact that I knew these families had lost their home and lost everything.

Diana: So, you come from Protection every day. How is that drive, every day? I mean, has it gotten better?

Deb: Yeah, it's better, but we still...

Dan: I can still see it.

Deb: We're still amazed. You know, I drive north where that wind came from the lake and came south. I drive that every day. I can still see the difference of where that wind shift was and where that fire came across there. Even though the grass did grow back, there's still that. The highway is still black where that fire crossed 34 Highway, going north from the Sitka junction. It's still black in those areas. It just scorched the highway. And going towards Englewood, you can see where it scorched the highway when it went across there.

Diana: And those trees?

Deb: Yes.

Dan: The tree rows are gone.

Deb: Yes. Our landscape has changed because these 100-year old cottonwoods are dead. A lot of them are still standing, but the bark has fallen off of them. They're dying. They're dying a slow death. Some of them, after the rains came, some of them had just branches that were green. But as the bark has fallen off of them the trees are dying. And we haven't had any rain up to now. We are so dry again. We're in the same position we were last March, maybe even in a worse position. It really frightens me and I know everybody, anybody that smells smoke is making phone calls. So that emotional end is still there. It's still really relevant.

Diana: So, when the fire alarm goes off now, what do you guys think?

Dan: You just cross your fingers and say, "Well, here we go." One of the things that really got me, after I came back to Protection Tuesday night. Greg, the fire chief, called me and said, "We got the fire stopped. The wind backed up enough, we stopped it. Protection is going to be okay for now." I thought, "Well, I'm here." I took a quick shower and changed and went back to Ashland, but I had my gear with me. I didn't even take my gear off when I went back to Protection. So I geared back up with fresh clothes on and came back over, and it was enough of a break that they said, "There's a meal down at the Christian Church." So, I went in there, and that was my first hot meal in almost 30 hours. I'm coming out of there, and Janae Wilson and her girls came up there and just ran up there and gave me a great big hug. And I thought, they've lost everything, and I'm fine. And I told them, I said, "Well, I'm worried about you guys." She said, "We're fine. We're worried about you guys."

Diana: Yeah, there was a lot of that.

Deb: There were lots of stories. There was a guy up north that was hauling water to the fireman, that had lost his house. None of the firemen knew it at that time, and there's just story after story like that.

Diana: So, what can you do, or have you done, to prepare for a future fire?

Deb: We've made sure we've upgraded equipment at the firehouse. At EMS we came up with plans and decided what we will do, supplies, ice packs, and burn supplies, and that kind of thing. The school has emergency plans towards housing and becoming a disaster resource center for people to go to. The churches, I think the churches, the Christian church, that camp was a wonderful thing for people to go if they needed a bed. And they've upgraded. They have air conditioning and some of that in their dining halls and are upgrading their dormitories with air conditioners.

Diana: I think it was more cold there than it was hot, right, during most of

Deb: Yeah. But they have upgraded. Did a lot of work down there, and still are.

Diana: So, you think the community is better prepared?

Deb: Yeah.

Dan: I think so. We know now, everybody knows that it can happen. We've always talked about it before to a point, but you know, it'll happen somewhere else. Well, it didn't happen somewhere else, it was us.

Deb: One of the good things that Ashland had already in place was a community foundation. And those people did a good job, because that was – when people were wanting to send money and do things like that, that was a good safe place for that money to go. Those people did a great job!

Diana: And all the volunteers that came and they took care of that, too. Kind of, concerning that Strategic Planning Committee that they had.

Deb: That was a big thing for us. You know, looking back, because I don't think they had anything like that in place the year before when that fire went through Harper County up into Medicine Lodge, and they were pretty well overwhelmed.

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

Deb: I hope we don't have to relive it.

Dan: I hope we don't have to do it again. Of course, I thought that after the Anderson Creek fire over at Medicine Lodge. I thought, man, we'll never see another one like this. It was just – it was just awesome. It was mind boggling to see that – to know how far that that fire was, and how wide that was at the same time. It happened so fast, that was the difference between our fire here and Anderson Creek. It stayed down in those canyons, and they could actually sit and wait for the fire to come up to them. We burned as much in 24 hours, and it took three days over there to burn that much. Ours was just so fast.

Deb: It came out of Oklahoma into Southwest Kansas, west and south of Englewood, there was a lot of pasture grassland. When it came up through there and up towards Gardiner Ranch and then on into Ashland, there's a lot, lots and lots of grassland.

Diana: And up north. There wasn't any wheat fields up there to...

Deb: Not a lot. Very few.

Dan: Then when that wind switched and it came down off that road, it's like driving down into a bowl. If you stand up there at the top of the ridge up there and look towards Ashland, Ashland sits in a hole. I mean, this whole area sits in a valley. When that fire came from that direction at that time, that was just solid grass all the way into Ashland.

Deb: We drove up, took pictures that weekend, on Sunday, after the fire and took pictures of Clark County Lake. It went from being green and lush to just black. Cleaned out all the trees and the brush. The change in it was pretty dramatic.

Dan: When we were doing that, that's when I realized how far north that fire had went while we were up there, before the wind switched. I figured that it was going through the lake already, where we were at, when that wind switched it was already through the lake, because it went so far north. It was north of the Pike Ranch. You could see exactly where that stopped when that wind came in and then that just made the big circle when it switched it from the northeast to the southeast, and then that was just a straight arrow towards Protection when it was clear up north there. That's where the Protection fire came from.

Deb: It went from the lake down towards Giles' ranch, and towards the Lexington community. From there, it crossed into Comanche County and did all that.