

Debbie Trahern

Diana: What is your name?

Debbie: I am Debbie Trahern.

Diana: Where do you live?

Debbie: Here in Ashland.

Diana: What's your occupation?

Debbie: I'm the deputy county appraiser for Clark County.

Diana: Yes, and how old are you?

Debbie: I'm 54.

Diana: Okay, when did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as "the fire" that occurred on March 6th.

Debbie: The afternoon of March 6th.

Diana: Okay, where were you?

Debbie: I was at work.

Diana: What was your first reaction.

Debbie: You know when I first heard there was a fire, I didn't think too much about it but when I got the IRIS alert, that was alarming to say the least.

Diana: And after you received the IRIS alert what did you do?

Debbie: My first thought was to go home and throw together a few things and then get over to help my daughter Jeanette Seacat and the girls get their stuff together because sometimes she's a procrastinator and doesn't seem to see the urgency of things.

So that is what I did. However, I realized my evacuation plan was not thought out very well. I just grabbed a few things like a change of clothes and my medicine and my dog and my dog's food. And that was about it.

Diana: And where did you evacuate to?

Debbie: Coldwater.

Diana: And where did you go once you got to Coldwater?

Debbie: To the high school gym.

Diana: Okay, and how long did you stay there?

Debbie: We stayed there overnight and did not leave until they released us. I was in the cafeteria area when they announced that the Ashland residents were free to go home.

Diana: Who was in charge?

Debbie: The one making that announcement, I believe, was Megan Snyder. I think that was her name, Kena Jackson's daughter.

Diana: So, did you have someplace to sleep? Did you have someplace to get food? How did you take care of those types of things?

Debbie: We went and got pizza at Dave's Pizza, and ate in the gym, and slept in the car.

Diana: And how many dogs did you take with you?

Debbie: I had two dogs in my vehicle.

Diana: When did she come back? Oh no... during the night, what kind of things were you hearing about what the fire was doing in Ashland.

Debbie: I was periodically texting Becky Mishler, who was back at command central, asking her various things and visiting with Jay on the phone because he didn't evacuate. Darin needed help moving cattle across the road out there on the Tower Hill, to get them out of the line of the fire. And so he stayed behind with Darren, when they got done doing that, they had closed the roads by then and he was not able to evacuate. So he stayed at home.

Diana: What type of things did Becky tell you?

Debbie: She had just told me things like it was getting close to Ashland. At one point she told me that she thought that they, command central, may have to evacuate the building they were in, that they were making those preparations. That alarmed me, because I knew that if that was the case, that my house is west of command central! I just knew there wasn't a lot of distance there.

Diana: So did you get much sleep Monday evening?

Debbie: I would say maybe at the most an hour to an hour and a half. But even over there, sitting in the car, I could smell nothing but smoke.

Diana: Could you see any flames?

Debbie: Not from where I was sitting in the car.

Diana: When you went over to Coldwater, did you see smoke or flames on your way over?

Debbie: No, we left early enough that we did not have to drive through that.

Diana: So when did you come back?

Debbie: It would have been Tuesday morning, oh, around 8:00 or 8:30, I believe. Because at that point I didn't know if I needed to come back and get ready and go to work. And I remember calling Becky on the way back to town and saying, "Hey, we just got released to come back. Are we working today?" And that's when she informs me that the county was closed for the day.

Diana: So then what did you do for the day?

Debbie: Then I went home and tried to just regroup myself and then I went to the fire station to help with meals and that stuff and ended up taking meals out to the country because nobody at the fire station knew where to take them.

Diana: As in where to meet up with our fire trucks, as in directions?

Debbie: When they gave them a road and a location, nobody knew for sure where that was at. And beings I worked at the county and I'm all over this county, I knew exactly where they were saying I needed to meet up with the semi water truck.

Diana: So what kind of camp-types of meals were you taking?

Debbie: We were taking out sandwiches, fruit, chips. I think there was beef jerky, things like that that the firemen could just grab and eat. We were taking out water and Gatorade.

Diana: When you were at the firehouse, were there lots of donations coming in during that day?

Debbie: Yes. I probably got there around tenish in the morning, and, you know, people were... Everybody wanted to do something; nobody knew exactly what to do and so they were just bringing mostly water and food, as in cakes, cookies, that kind of thing.

Diana: What kind of sandwiches did you make?

Debbie: I believe they were making ham and turkey.

Diana: Did they get any of the hamburgers that day?

Debbie: They took those out for supper, I believe. I did not help with the supper run out there. I helped assemble hamburgers, but I didn't.... come to think of it, I'm not sure who to take them out.

Diana: So then Wednesday, did you have to go back to work?

Debbie: Wednesday, we spent... I would say Wednesday and Thursday we both spent the day trying to figure out what we needed to do. We knew that we needed to go out and see every piece of property in the path of the Starbuck Fire to assess the damages. We knew that FEMA was going to be wanting some figures on how much damage there was. And so.

Diana: So when you say "we", who's "we"?

Debbie: We are the county appraiser, Jeremy McCauley, Mandy Ramirez, who's a field appraiser, and myself, at that point. Jeremy lives in Andover and so a lot of our communication was over the phone. He has a vast knowledge of mapping, so one of the first things he said was, we needed to get a hold of the National Weather Service in Dodge and see if they could give us a layer showing the fire path. So Mandy got that, probably, I think we got that late Wednesday or early Thursday morning. And so then he was able to lay that into our GIS information and find out what parcels were affected.

Clark County had three thousand seven hundred seventy-five parcels and we probably had to look at at least a third of those.

Diana: Mostly in the western part of the county? Or all over the county?

Debbie: All over. I mean, it was not only the Starbuck Fire, but the Clark County fire coming down from the north. So we had to go up there as far as it had started on the Denton Ranch and then follow it down to the Comanche County line.

Diana: So what type of information did you get for each parcel that you looked at?

Debbie: In our office, we have what's called a property record card that gives the owner's name, address, the legal description, what buildings, if any, are on that property. So then we could take that out and look and say, "Yeah, the house is completely gone and all the outbuildings are gone," or "That outbuilding's gone, but these ones are here," so that when we came back in and tallied everything, we knew what values we lost and what values were still there.

Diana: Did you take pictures?

Debbie: Yes, we took pictures of every heap of rubble that was out there.

Diana: So, how long did this take you?

Debbie: We finally got that clear to go out Friday morning, from the sheriff's office, because they didn't want us out in the way of any of the fire departments that were out still so checking hot spots.

Diana: There was still a fire burning up until Friday.

Debbie: Yes. We've even seen some when we were still out all over the weekend, some little hot spots that had flared back up. When we were getting ready to go out Friday morning, Millie Fudge called us and said, "There are some people coming with the Red Cross that need to go around and see the houses that were burned. They need to follow you guys."

Which was okay, but that kind of slowed us down by a couple hours of getting started, because they got here and they wanted to eat and then we got out. And then, after we were out just a little bit, we determined that they were only interested in the occupied homes that were lost. We were interested in everything that was lost, and so at that point, I made them a list with addresses of the places that were residences that were occupied that they could go look at. So at that point, we split up because we were slowing each other down.

Diana: So the three from your office, did you all stayed together or did you go separate directions?

Debbie: Well, actually by Friday, there was also another person that joined up to help us. That was Pam Palmer, formerly Pam Wilson, and she had been in and helped us for a few years when Rogene Heugatter had resigned and we needed help regrouping and figuring out what we were going to do and were supposed to do.

So she came, and her and Jeremy went out and they went north, and me and Mandy went south down to Englewood. And so we went down there and worked our way back this way and they went up and started working their way back. And that worked for Friday. Saturday, it was determined that Mandy and Jeremy needed to stay in the office and start working on maps that Millie Fudge, the emergency preparedness coordinator, was requesting from us and other phone calls we were getting, people inquiring about things.

So they stayed in the office on Saturday, and me and Pam went out and finished up Saturday and

Sunday. We put in 11 hour days on Saturday and Sunday to finish up.

Diana: So what was your initial reaction when you went out and first saw a parcel that had a house, or even when you were going out and taking sandwiches out on Tuesday?

Debbie: I think my first initial response hit me on the way home, when I hit the county line and seen the Koehen house and then the Wilson's houses gone.

I think that's when it hit me that this was real, that there was a lot of damage out there. When I was at Coldwater, we were hearing things like..., we had I had heard the Wilson House... hadn't heard both of the Wilson houses. So I had heard a few, and my initial thought was I was trying to prepare myself for seeing a lot of dead animals. I thought, I don't know how I'm going to respond to that. But that didn't seem to bother me as much as knowing that I would see... There was nothing left of most of those houses and to see that it... in some places, it was burned just right up to their porch, you know, scorched their siding and that's all it did. It was just craziness, how it would jump over things and it would burn around things that the firemen were not out there to protect, because they couldn't, they couldn't be everywhere.

Diana: So did you see a lot of dead animals when you went out there appraising?

Debbie: I wouldn't say a lot. We did see some but we didn't see the big piles that they had already started piling up.

Diana: And when you were at people's parcels, were the owners there? Did you have to deal with owners?

Debbie: Most most of them were not, some were. And that was, you know, difficult. I mean, what do you say? "Sorry," seems so insignificant.

Diana: Did you see any reporter?

Debbie: No, we never came across any.

Diana: Once you had all this information compiled, how long did it take you to get all the reports together that you could give to the EOC to the Emergency Command Center?

Debbie: I think we got them done on Sunday night. Then Monday, I think mostly Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, we were working on them. I think we probably had them ready Wednesday, but not... we weren't, "ready, ready." We wanted to double-check everything and look over everything one more time. And then we compiled a book.

And Millie also has a copy of this book that has every parcel and what we crossed out that was gone or damaged and then a picture of them. So she has a full set, just like we have.

Diana: Are you still dealing with aftermath of the fire and will you until tax time?

Debbie: It fell at a time where we had just set values, March 1st. So we couldn't make any changes off the tax roll, but given the fact that it was a national disaster and the commissioners agreed to do the program, and I apologize I didn't look at what it was called, it's a relief that those taxpayers who lost their homes will get the taxes abated on their home only. So that will help them. And so I had to help the clerk establish that list and then they sent out the notices to those people.

Diana: Did you have any physical or financial loss yourself from the fire?

Debbie: Me personally? I along with my siblings and Becky, own some ground in Harper County, Oklahoma, that was burned by the Starbuck Fire.

Diana: Did you lose fencing and pasture?.

Debbie: Yes, fencing and pasture was gone.

Diana: Any animals?

Debbie: No, we just lease it out. We lease it to Kurt Woodruff. In our lease agreement, we had to provide the fencing.

Diana: So did you take advantage of the KLA and the community foundation fire applications?

Debbie: No, since the land was in Harper County, Oklahoma. We did not. We did get some fence posts and that kind of stuff that came in.

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

Debbie: You know, I didn't see the fire itself. I just think that my most vivid memory is when I came back and crossed the Comanche/Clark County line and started seeing the devastation.

Diana: Have you ever experienced wildfires before? Is there any history in your family about wildfires?

Debbie: No, this was my first one.

Diana: So did you volunteer after the fire, after the appraisal, when the volunteer people came to town.

Debbie: Yes I did, after I was done with my work part of it. Then I started helping at the Christian church. We were helping fix meals for firemen and others because the fire affected some of our church family members. So from there, we went to fixing some meals out of the Hardesty House for about a weekend I think it was, till we could get that church camp cleaned up and start feeding them out at the church camp.

Diana: So when did you start making meals? Was it like Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday during the week of the fire, when all the big strike teams were here? I remember spaghetti on Wednesday night at the Christian Church.

Debbie: I think that Wednesday night was the first night and I wasn't able to help with that first week. I made some breakfast burritos during that week. But yes, I do believe it started on Wednesday night.

Diana: So did you have a lot of contact with the strike team firemen that were in town?

Debbie: Yes, some. My first experience with them was up at the firehouse. I wish I could remember where he was from, but one of the volunteers that had come in and was so impressed with the generosity of this community. And he told me that he went into communities where they didn't feed them and they didn't give them a bottle of water. We told them we were just, "Glad you're here, and

we're going to take care of you." And he was just at awe about the community and how we took care of them.

Diana: So how long did you make meals at the camp?

Debbie: Gosh, we were making meals at the camp until May. I think it was the first part of May. We were scheduled to have some remodeling done at the camp on that Wednesday which would have been March 8th.

We were going to come in and start installing some air conditioning units and blow in insulation. We had to put that on hold, and so we could only give it until May, I think it was. Then we needed to get started because our camp started the last week in June. I think we fed them through April.

Diana: When did they open the camp dorms to volunteers?

Debbie: I think that next week.

Diana: How did that work? Did you have anything to do with that?

Debbie: I didn't really do too much. You know, we just kind of tried to get them to give us numbers of the volunteers who were going to be here and how many we would have to feed, which was kind of chaotic but understandable.

Diana: What kind of meals did you make?

Debbie: We fed them good.

Diana: How many, I mean like breakfast, lunch?

Debbie: Well, we fixed breakfast and then we did not fix them lunches. They were on their own for lunch, and most crews brought their own sandwich fixing stuff and kept it our walk-in cooler and made their sandwiches in the mornings and then headed out. Then we would feed them supper, and it was a full course meal.

Diana: Like an example?

Debbie: Oh, like chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, corn, rolls, and desserts. We did have a lot of generous people bringing in desserts and cookies and that kind of stuff. We didn't have to make any of that kind of stuff, but you know, they would have breakfast. They would have sausage, biscuits, gravy, pancakes.

Diana: Did you go down and help every night after work or did you kind of just do certain nights?

Debbie: For about a month, I did every night. Then that became a lot, so then I was going like two to three nights a week and then usually on weekends.

Diana: Did you have a lot of supplies for the volunteers to pick up like safety glasses and stuff?

Debbie: Oh, yes.

Diana: So where did that come from?

Debbie: Just from everywhere. Every convoy that came through here bringing hay, not only brought hay, but they would bring tons of supplies. We had, like you said, the safety glasses, we had gloves, boots, like over-boots type things, some clothes. We tried to stay out of the clothes business, but we did have some jackets and things like that that come in handy because some crews came and then the weather would turn cold and they weren't prepared. All kinds of snack foods. Eye drops, chapstick, Kleenex... just you name it, and they brought it.

Diana: So how would you describe all the people or agencies that proved to be most helpful? Who would that have been?

Debbie: Well, you know, I didn't know, because I was busy doing my job. I didn't really know what all was involved in the whole scope of what it took to pull this all off. I went to a meeting afterward at the library that Milly Fudge had put on for all the volunteers. It was at that point, we were trying to figure out if we were going to continue to do meals or, you know, stop doing the meals out of the camp and that kind of stuff.

They kind of walked through the whole process of how from the first time they got the phone call that the fire and our fire department went to go assist and where it went from there. I was just in awe at all of the behind-the-scenes things that it took to pull this whole thing off. And I know people picked it apart and said, "Why didn't they do this or why couldn't they be that there." Or, "I never seen any firemen at my house."

But when you step back and look at it from there to where we went, and how we did, I'm just impressed that Millie held it together and she had a good team with her. She couldn't have done it alone. It took a lot of people behind the scenes working to keep that whole thing organized and together.

Diana: You had an emotional response to the fire. Have you done anything to deal with your emotions? Have you been able to talk with people or in some way get emotional help?

Debbie: No, you know, I've not talked with anybody. It's just when you get together, and you share with people, and you hear their stories. It just kind of helps heal on its own. I didn't personally lose anything. You know, had I been one that lost my house or something I might have had to get some help.

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

Debbie: I think the resilience of our community is shining through, and just knowing that when there's something big like this, that we can come together as a community. It appeared to me, that most people pitched in and helped in the area that they were gifted to help with.

Diana: So what can you do, or have you done, to prepare for another emergency. Maybe not a fire, but some other emergency of this magnitude.

Debbie: Well I do. Like I said early on, I thought I... you know, I'm by nature pretty laid back and don't get too rattled and I thought I had a plan in place. The evacuation plan, but obviously I didn't. So I have thought about that more. The things that I didn't grab are just things, but there were some things that couldn't be replaced.

Diana: So what about the community? Is there some ways they could prepare better for something like this?

Debbie: You know that was one of the things that was brought up in the meeting with Millie, and I think because I didn't know, I was told to go to Coldwater, and so I, following the directions, that's where I went. I, at the time, did not realize that there was people in all different directions. That was one of the things they talked about that we as a community need to be better at knowing, "This is where we need to go. And this is what we need to do."

Diana: And you did get the IRIS alert?

Debbie: Yes, I did.

Diana: How did you receive the IRIS alert?

Debbie: On my phone.

Diana: Did you share that with anyone?

Debbie: Well, no. I mean, because Mandy got one just seconds after I did and Kayla Maris works across the hall and she got hers just as... we all got them at the same time, not simultaneously.

And about that time was when Becky hollered down the hall "Everybody leave the building, get home, you're being evacuated." And so, no, I didn't. But I had, you know, previously to this, Millie had come to a civic club meeting and talked about the IRIS Alert. And I had signed me and my husband and Jeanette and probably Darin, too, all at that time to get them.

Diana: So then you talked about your husband helping and Darin to get the cattle. Did they have any losses? What did they do with them?

Debbie: He did not. He lost pasture. He had access to wheat pasture north across the road, so he was able to get that pasture of cattle out onto wheat pasture. He also had some cattle down around the Sitka area that he was able to get on wheat pasture, so he did not lose any cattle. He just lost his grass, all the grass he had leased.

Diana: So did he go to Englewood? Or did he just do his own cattle?

Debbie: Just his own.

Diana: He didn't have time to go anywhere else. So then, where did he go after they got the cattle moved?

Debbie: He stayed at his shop and watched the fire coming on the horizon. Jay stayed at home and watched it.

Diana: So between doing your job and volunteering, evacuating, and your job and your volunteer work lasting almost into May, right? Do you now have a better idea of how you could have done the volunteering better? I mean like, how you could be more efficient at the meals that you guys did, it or how that could have worked a little better? Or was it great?

Debbie: It worked, and you know, any time you work with a group of people, there's some difference of opinions on things. I think for the most part it worked. I wish we would have maybe asked for volunteers outside of our church to come in earlier and not waited till we were really burned out. That probably would have helped.

Diana: So then, after they quit at the camp, did you go help at the other churches had volunteers?

Debbie: No, I did not.

Diana: So do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd like to share? Anything else that you think needs to be included?

Debbie: I don't really know what it would be. I'm not sure how to say it. It was an experience that I'm glad that we lived through and no lives were taken. Because I don't think we can prepare for anything in the future if we don't experience something in the past to help you know what you need to do or what can be done differently and that sort of thing.

Diana: Like at your job, where you draw up the parcels and where you go out and appraise things, after going out and appraising the burned parcels, did you guys come up with some new ways of doing things or better ways of getting information or sharing information?

Debbie: What did come to light to me is we really needed plot plans on every parcel in the country because when you got out there and there would be a building here or there gone, it was hard to figure out which one was gone. On our property record card, there's the year of the building or an estimated year of the building and the measurements of it.

Diana: No pictures.

Debbie: No pictures. We never took pictures of outbuildings, and so I think in this next year when things kind of start slowing down, that's one of the things I would like to work on. Now we have access to aerial photos, so we can get some aerial photos of these home sites and have it with us then, when we go out.

Diana: Where do the aerial photos come from? Is that a drone-type thing or is that a flyover?

Debbie: The state is flown every so many years. And I do think the state pays for that but I'm not totally sure about that, but it's getting flown again this fall, and so we will have new photography to start working on probably September or October. We're supposed to have it.

And now what we're doing is, matter of fact, I was just out today, we were out starting to look and see who is starting to rebuild. We know some people who have taken advantage of the neighborhood review program that the county has. But we also know other people that won't, and so we're out looking and picking up some of the new buildings that have already started to go up.

Diana: So there are a lot of new buildings that are out there already?

Debbie: I think there will be. But, you know, from the fire, we picked up one today. But we had five or six others that people just built. There's a new house up at Minneola.

Diana: Is there a certain area of the county that had more devastation than the rest of the county? Lost more homes?

Debbie: I would think most of the homes, the majority of the homes were lost in... Part of it is in Center Township, but some of it's in Sitka Township.

Diana: Lexington?

Debbie: Lexington had a few. Out of the properties, you know, we lost 31 homes, but only 19 of those were occupied. Eight were damaged, but not damaged beyond repair. So. There's probably been five applied for neighborhood review so far that are planning on building a new home. And I know that there's probably five or six more. They just haven't decided what they're going to do yet.