

Diana: Today is January 9, 2018. What is your name?

Lindsey: My name is Lindsey Bird.

Diana: And where do you live?

Diana: I live in Ashland, Kansas.

Diana: And what is your occupation?

Lindsey: I'm a dispatcher for the Clark County Sheriff's Office. Also, we do jail management.

Diana: And how old are you?

Lindsey: Thirty-one years old.

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

Lindsey: Very early on. We had an agency assist down in Oklahoma where the Englewood Fire Department was fighting. I can't remember the name of the town.

Diana: Gate?

Lindsey: Yeah, it was really near Gate, and we were trying to have units over there. We are really good about... I think we're really good about our county assistance, where we go to Oklahoma or surrounding counties and try to help when we can. So the Englewood Fire Department was down that way trying to help, probably about 10:00 in the morning, maybe earlier. It seemed like it was early on that they were trying to fight this fire that was in Oklahoma.

Diana: So you were at work?

Lindsey: Yes.

Diana: And you were dispatching at the time when you heard about the fire?

Lindsey: Yes. I had gone to work at 7:00 in the morning that day.

Diana: And then, had you been getting a lot of calls about the fire or was the first call when they asked for mutual aid for Englewood to come help Gate?

Lindsey: Really, the first time I heard about it was about 10:00 in the morning. We were doing kind of a standard mutual aid for Gate, Oklahoma and things didn't really pick up until later in the afternoon when you could see the smoke coming on the horizon. We started to look at the radar very closely. Things were getting kind of hectic and Englewood was asking for more assistance for the mutual aid. You could tell the situation was getting worse by the hour really.

Diana: So as a dispatcher for the sheriff's office part of your job is dispatching fire trucks for the fire department? You do all of their dispatch information?

Lindsey: Yes ma'am.

Diana: Call all the trucks and all that? So did you have all of the departments in Clark County out fighting fire at some point?

Lindsey: It seemed. Yeah, definitely. Later on in the afternoon, I think we had all our units dispatched. I think it was probably... I mean don't quote me on this part, because I'm just going off of memory. It just seemed like later on in the afternoon, after the lunch hour, is when things really became dire and we were trying to pull all the units we could. I think that's when we started having Minneola units involved. The fire up north was the fire that broke out around the wind farm. We really became all hands on deck. I can't tell you exactly what time we started calling for assistance, but I know it's been recorded and all that information has gone on the record, when we are asking for surrounding county assistance.

Diana: So when you were first started, like say around 10:00 or 11:00 in the morning, were you dispatching by yourself?

Lindsey: Yes.

Diana: And then, toward the afternoon, like say 1:30 or 2:00, did you have help to dispatch?

Lindsey: I don't recall really asking for help until it started getting really hectic, maybe two or three in the afternoon. And that's what... I mean, I work with Stacy Knowles who's the office administrator, but she also is the dispatch supervisor and she provided assistance. She will jump in and just help. It's such a common thing, where we're just doing as much as we can by ourselves. But I was really grateful that day to have her help because she jumped right in and helped me a lot. I actually ended up staying until 2 o'clock that morning, but it seems like the worst calls I started getting were after the evacuation. That's really when I needed Stacy's help, is when we had people just asking, "What's going on?" We had some emergency calls, that people were getting stuck in the smoke. They were getting stranded. That's really when I was very thankful for that additional help.

Diana: So you were fielding 911 calls and regular telephone calls?

Lindsey: Yes.

Diana: And dispatch calls...

Lindsey: And also checking on inmates when we could.

Diana: Right.

Lindsey: Yes. We had to put them kind of on hold and they were a little nervous.

Diana: Did you have a full cell?

Lindsey: I recall maybe two to three inmates, so it wasn't too bad. I remember them asking, you know, "Are we going to be okay?" I just told them, "Everybody's been evacuated. I'm here. If I feel safe here, then you should feel safe here, too." So it was just a different situation.

Diana: So at some point they set up the incident management team and started dispatching the emergency vehicles from there. How did that change what you were dispatching?

Lindsey: I feel like that helped tremendously. In the dispatch office, you get so many phone calls and so much radio traffic, that you're trying to communicate with your officers, your firemen, your ambulance workers, the EMS crew, while also getting so many calls from the public, that when we are able to take the command center or when we are able to involve the command center, they are able to take all of that VHF traffic that we usually get so we can focus on calls from the public and really do a more efficient job managing what we do.

Diana: So the VHF calls would have been all of the sheriff's?

Lindsey: VHF calls probably would have been more the fire, the fire and EMS working together.

Diana: Were you also having ambulance/emergency calls during this time?

Lindsey: Yeah, we did. We had a couple who were stranded on a culvert that we wanted to get out. I mean we wanted to send ambulances everywhere, honestly, because you had people that were having smoke inhalation, when they're calling. The big deal was, we had an accident in which there was a vehicle pileup with a semi-truck that unfortunately resulted in a fatality. We were trying to get assistance there. We were trying to get assistance to people who needed like patient-transfers from the hospital. We really had the ambulance kind of driving all over the place really, trying to get help to people.

Diana: So once the hospital in Ashland was evacuated, where was the place that they took emergency patients?

Lindsey: I thought that they took them to Oklahoma. It seems like the nursing home and hospitals, we evacuated them. I think, from what I remember, I think it was about an hour before we evacuated the town. I know for sure we evacuated the hospitals and nursing home well over an hour, and well before we evacuated the whole town. I thought that they were busing people down to Laverne, but I wasn't sure.

Diana: Buffalo?

Lindsey: Oh, Buffalo, yeah.

Diana: They took them on to Woodward, plus the people that they took on to Coldwater. But what about the accident people? Did they have somewhere to go with them? Did they take them to Minneola?

Lindsey: No, there wasn't really a place for the ambulance to go to Minneola, because it was so dangerous. So I think what they were doing... I think you'd have to talk to Millie Fudge and Joe Fast, as far as the details, because I was on a 911 call with a couple for probably about 30 to 40 minutes. Now, that's a long time, it felt like that long a time. I was on a call with a couple when things were really bad, just trying to keep them calm and roll up their windows, you know, try not to inhale the smoke, put their clothes over their face. I was just trying to give them directions, while we had that accident call. I had Stacy working on that. Then I think we had another dispatcher show up who also tried to relieve things. So the communication was a little bit difficult to handle. I do recall the ambulance trying to take care of that truck driver accident, but I don't know where their destination was going because I think that was something Stacy was taking care of.

Diana: So you had lots of people calling 911 because there was fire around their house?

Lindsey: Oh, absolutely yeah.

Diana: In their vicinity or what?

Lindsey: We had some people calling 911 just to ask if they needed to evacuate, and we were like, "If you heard that you need to evacuate, then you need to evacuate." We gave them directions where to go. There were people who chose to stay and try to fight things on their own. We had to say, "You've got to get out of there." We tried to send firemen their way and just help out as much as we could.

Diana: Did you have enough firemen to send everywhere?

Lindsey: No!

Diana: What type of things did you have to tell people?

Lindsey: It was really hard to say that we're trying to get people to your location as soon as we can, but you

don't have an ETA. One of the examples was we had a gentleman stranded out in just smoke. I had his location from the 911 pings, but I had officers out trying to cut fence for cattle. I had officers... I'm not going to say they didn't know where they were, but I'm going to say that they had so much on their plate it was hard to prioritize which place to go for dispatch. So I had to tell people to hang in there and then, you know, not be sure of what the outcome was. Thank God we had some civilians step in and help.

There was a lot of help from the community, but I really do think that we were understaffed, both firefighter-wise, officer-wise and EMS-wise. I'm really thankful that the casualties were as low as they were, but it was hard dispatching feeling like you were almost at a disadvantage, because none of us had experienced anything like this before.

Diana: Did you have citizens stopping by the sheriff's office?

Lindsey: Oh yeah, throughout the whole effort. Through the week, we had citizens stopping by when they were allowed to come back, of course. They stopped by and gave us food and, you know, they were really thankful. I've been to conferences where they talked about the tornado in Moore, Oklahoma, and how dispatchers and a lot of people brought food to fire and EMS and the officers, but they totally forgot about the dispatchers. Their building got hit by the tornadoes, so they were without plumbing for three days. These people were working 12-hour shifts! It was not that way with us at all. We had a lot of help from the community. We were pulling a lot of long shifts, but we did the best we could.

Diana: Okay, people who evacuated from Ashland. You had family that evacuated, where did they go? And how long were they gone?

Lindsey: Well, my other half, Matthew Harmon, I was kind of worried (I'll say freaking out). So I kind of texted him way before the evacuations. I was like, you need to be prepared to leave as soon as you can. If you can go home from work right now, do it.

And of course you know, they haven't released the official evacuation, but I knew something bad was happening. So I just... I wanted him to be safe. So he was well aware there was a serious situation, but it was kind of hard, because it seemed like a lot of people around town didn't take the alert seriously and took their time packing or whatever. It seemed like he got like a 30-minute head start, just from me being so serious. "You need to get out right now!" He was able to tell our family to head to Coldwater — it is where I told everybody to go. So they went over to Coldwater. A lot of people went and stayed at the gym, but Matthew and his family went out to Greensburg and had a more comfortable night in the hotel.

Diana: So did you keep in contact with them after they evacuated?

Lindsey: When I could. There was so much time I spent on the phone; I can't just pick up my cell phone and try to check on my family. When we had some downtime, when things were just more about dispatching fire and less about taking care of the civilian calls after the evacuation, I was able to update them. That was a really nice relief to know that they were all safe and out of the county.

Diana: So when did they return home?

Lindsey: They returned when we had the all clear the next morning, though I think some people kind of snuck into town early!

Diana: So you said you worked till 2:00 in the morning. Did you go home and get some sleep then?

Lindsey: It was very difficult. I think I did work. Yeah, I worked the next day. I don't remember if I took a different shift. I think I did work the next day, because I mean it was so crazy. I try to be a professional and be like, "Oh, this is my job." I try to put the emotions away and be like, "It doesn't matter that I only had five hours sleep. I can handle this." And so I think that's probably what happened, but I didn't prepare very well for it, to be honest. I wanted to go from the heart. That's what I remember of it.

Diana: You're fine! So your shift schedule that week was probably supposed to be what 7 to 3?

Lindsey: Yes.

Diana: Every day, and then because of all the chaos on Monday with the fire you went till two and then somebody came in and relieved you?

Lindsey: Yeah. We actually had to have an officer go pick up a dispatcher. She had already been evacuated to Coldwater, and they were not letting her family bring her back to Clark County. They had to be at the county line and have an officer go pick her up and say, "Hey, we really need her to come in! Please allow her to cross the county line so we can have some help tonight!"

Then we had kind of a "floater" dispatcher help with the inmate's supper. So at one point from, oh I would say probably about 7 in the evening till about 11 or 12, we had three dispatchers on duty helping each other out with phones, radio and inmate duties.

Diana: So Tuesday through Saturday of that week, when all the fire trucks were here and when we're still having a fire and all of that, what were your dispatch jobs then? Were you dispatching any of the fire trucks then or were they still out of the incident management?

Lindsey: Most of them were out of the incident management. We had a different protocol. Of course, people were getting very alarmed about smoldering. I remember that being a big issue and just only dispatching "Flame Sight" only, because we just didn't have enough time and manpower to look at every little patch of smoke that was in the county. Eighty percent of the county was smoking and smoldering.

So it was really a relief to have that command center dispatch, because we were just getting constant calls: people wanting to check on their homes, people wanting to return when they shouldn't, people wanting to check on their animals...

I think one of the hardest things was just telling people that they had to leave animals behind. For me, because I'm such an animal lover, it was hard to go against my heart and be like, "You need to get out of there because you can't take care of your animals if you can't take care of yourself." It was really difficult.

Diana: So when did you get back all of your dispatch duties? Was it within the week?

Lindsey: It was more than a week, for sure. We had the command set up. I remember towards the end of the week on a Friday, I got to be involved with command and relieve Stacy. It was great.

I loved meeting all the help that we had. The Colorado firefighters that came in as a special unit were just awesome. They seemed to really know what they were doing. Not that we don't here! It's just a different animal that they're used to dealing with. We were talking about some of the canyons, and they were like, "Oh, those are just little molehills," because they're used to fighting on the mountains. It's just kind of interesting seeing the difference in dynamics there.

Diana: So what type of things did you do at the command center?

Lindsey: Mostly just keep track of the radio and make sure that the command fire unit knew exactly where to go, from what the dispatcher had said, and kind of prioritize where to send people out and what special units need be involved. Honestly, I would rather do the command, because it kind of took the public out of it and it was more of getting to work on the fires themselves rather than your office calls, your sales calls, you know, all the other regular dispatch duties you have. So there was less distraction; we could focus more on the fire.

Diana: So when you were dispatching at the sheriff's office, you had a lot of irate people?

Lindsey: I think a lot of people get mad when they're scared. I think it's a natural reaction, and you just have to be calm and tell them, "We're doing as much as we can. We're not trying to put you off because of who you are or where you are from."

You know, we treat everybody equally, but there are some people that when they get nervous, they kind of get more aggressive with you. You just have to talk with them in a calm voice and let them know that we're trying as much as we can and we have their best interests in our hearts.

Diana: And did you have to call people back with some additional information?

Lindsey: Yeah, I mean I try to. Some people don't go the extra mile as much, but it's really hard to prioritize because of my regular job. I do try to keep people updated on their incidents and I like people to have that peace of mind, but when you have so much going on, sometimes you don't have the time to call people back. You just have to wait till they call back or whatever and just try to do the best you can. I'm kind of a people pleaser, so I tried to make sure people were happy.

Diana: So during the course of the week, since incident management was doing all of the dispatching for the fire and stuff, were you doing mostly ordinary things?

Lindsey: Yeah.

Diana: Were your ordinary things more like a regular week?

Lindsey: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we still took a lot of calls about the smoldering smoke, and we tried to give people as much information as we could. During the first few days, I'm really thankful that I had help with dispatch. The day of the fire, I'm going to kind of go backwards a little bit, but I was so thankful to have a regular week because the day of the fire and for the first time, you're having people screaming.

I've been working this job for a long time, but for the first time it seemed like I had people on the line that thought they were going to die. At one point, I had to ask Stacy if she could help me and just talk to these people for just a minute. That's all I needed, just a few minutes, because you're on the phone with someone for so long and they have that energy. They think they're going to pass away. You're just trying to say, "Just hang in there. Do the best you can."

Sometimes in your mind, your emotions start going. It's okay to pass it on to other people. So I was really happy to have that help for that one time where things got a little bit too emotional. I had to be like, "Hey, I just need two minutes now. Can you talk to these people for just a second?"

Diana: So people who are anxious about their condition isn't something you normally deal with?

Lindsey: Not really to this extent. I've never had someone be so concerned for their life as the one particular call that I had where they were just surrounded by smoke. Their other half wasn't quite listening to them and getting in the car when they should have.

Diana: So a lot of things were going on?

Lindsey: Yes, yes. And then you know it's a dangerous situation. I mean, I've dealt with domestics before where I've been calm as a cucumber and really helped some people. It might have been a more dangerous situation than this, but because of the energy going on, it just seemed like that much worse because there are so many other things happening at the same time. The emotions really were ramped up quite a bit.

Diana: Did you find yourself being overwhelmed because the phone kept ringing and the dispatch stuff just kept going on and on and on?

Lindsey: The phone calls don't bother me as much as the emotion in people's voices when you... I mean, I can handle the phone ringing every 10 to 15 minutes all day long, or whatever, or even sooner than that when it's just like... for example, there was a pipeline explosion.

I didn't dispatch that, but it was 30 miles away and we had over 400 phone calls that night and dispatch was going crazy. We were just giving information. That seems like a fun night for me, because it's just, it's not something that we definitely were involved in. All these callers were just trying to call for information only, you know, it wasn't like, "Our lives are in danger. Our cattle are in danger."

Like when you're having call, after call, after call, where people are genuinely scared for their lives, their wives, their loved ones, their animals and their property, that can really be hard on you. That was the most difficult part.

Diana: So let's talk about the evacuation. They did that over IRIS and with the sheriff's office. There were officers going up and down the streets with bullhorns. Was that successful or did you get people calling in that had heard that or seen it on Facebook or gotten an e-mail? Were there people that didn't have IRIS?

Lindsey: I know a lot of people actually didn't have the IRIS. I don't want to keep on record, but Matt didn't have the message. He only got what I had, and so did his parents because they opted out. However, one of the things I learned from this whole incident is we can actually call the National Weather Service and they can push notifications on evacuations. I didn't learn that until months afterwards, after knowing this was kind of an issue.

A lot of people heard from their friends or family and didn't necessarily see the officers going around town. There were some, I would say older people, that didn't trust what was going on maybe. I don't know what their hesitation was, but I had to assure them this is true and they needed to get out of town. There was nothing to really fear, but they just needed to comply with what the officers were saying.

Diana: So the weather service could do the same type of thing, like they do with a tornado.

Lindsey: Yeah. That would have been so helpful if we had known that was available at the time. I've been to conferences and stuff since then, and oh gosh, that would have been nice! So we have some more cards up our sleeves, but let's not hope there's a next time.

Diana: But if there is, we can be more prepared.

Lindsey: Yes, absolutely.

Diana: You said that people did bring you food this time, maybe not on Monday but soon afterward.

Lindsey: Yes.

Diana: They remembered you were there. Did you also go take advantage of the food at the cafeteria or at the Christian camp during the week afterwards?

Lindsey: I didn't and I don't really know that other dispatchers did. I know personally, I was doing fine. My family was back in town sooner than later and I'm kind of an independent person anyway, so I don't really take advantage of that. I felt honestly a little bit guilty because I didn't really have anything affect me so much. Honestly, it was more just trying to help other people.

Diana: So how did you feel when your family got to evacuate, but you had to stay here because your job required you to?

Lindsey: I think they felt worse about it than I did. It was a bummer, and I was really afraid for them because on the way out, there was fire everywhere.

I heard about other people that had evacuated and parts of their cars had melted off. They just didn't leave soon enough. But my family was so safe and I had so many updates from Matt that I wasn't as afraid. It's still heartbreaking having your family leave your town. I didn't know if I'd be safe going home for a while, but at 2 in the morning, when you realize command is only two houses away from your own house, you feel a little bit better about things!

Diana: They will come knock on your door! What's your most vivid memory of the fire?

Lindsey: I think my most vivid memory that I had, aside from some of the frantic calls that really kind of worked up those emotions, I think the worst part for me visually was about 6:30 p.m. when the smoke started rolling in the town and everything just became dark.

Diana: On Monday?

Lindsey: Yeah, on Monday. It was just like a thick fog rolling in, and you could smell the smoke and you know, you're at your job, your emotions are getting a little bit crazy, but you have to just realize you're safe where you are. You've got a job to do. This is okay, and you just carry on. I don't feel like our county would ever leave our dispatches behind, so you know.

Diana: So was it pitch-black dark?

Lindsey: It didn't get pitch black as much as it was just this odd, electric, dark energy. I sound like a hippie, but it is kind of what it is. I mean it definitely was darker than what it should have been. It wasn't like a winter's day at 5 where it's, you know, pretty much time to go to bed at 6, but it got super dark for this spring.

Diana: Did the lights come on?

Lindsey: Yeah, I mean it pretty much settled in the evening. It seemed like it was like sunset three hours earlier than it should have been. I mean it was a little bit frightening.

Yeah, it was just different because you're not used to that kind of weather change either. You could see the smoke on the radar on the weather channel, and just seeing it outside, that's when it really became vivid and hit home for me.

Diana: Did the police officers that had been out driving around, did they come by and tell you what was going on outside or were you just mainly talking to them on the radio?

Lindsey: It was mostly on the radio. I think that was also a very difficult part because you develop such friendships with these guys that you know what's kind of going on, but you don't see what they're seeing. So when you can tell a difference in their voice or anything like that, we know that they're excited or panicked or you know something big is going on.

You can hear it in their voice, and so you do feel very anxious for them because you know anything can happen out there. Of course, with our officer having the accident with his vehicle.

Diana: Were you on dispatch then?

Lindsey: Yeah. I think Stacy took that call. I mean we just were slammed with different calls. Most of that was on the radio though, so we were kind of back and forth. It's hard to say who did what, because Stacy might have heard it over the radio, him saying he'd had an accident. However, then it might have been me, getting units out there. We were just taking turns back and forth over the radio. It kind of blurs together a little bit.

Diana: Are all of your 911 calls taped?

Lindsey: Yeah.

Diana: And what about your radio dispatches, are they taped?

Lindsey: They are taped. I just don't know how long they're recorded for.

Diana: Or how long the tape lasts?

Lindsey: Yeah. Yeah.

Diana: How long it's kept because do they record over them at some point?

Lindsey: I don't think it's recorded over; I'm just not sure, because some of that electric stuff just goes over my head.

Diana: So when you were at home like at 2 in the morning, was it still pretty smoky?

Lindsey: Oh, it was very smoky. In the morning, you know, it was kind of foggy and there was just that kind of ash over your windshield. You know, they always talk about the Mount St. Helen's explosion with ash being on people's windshields, but I've never experienced anything like that.

But even with this fire closer than Mount St. Helen's, of course, but even that was kind of mystifying and just incredible. It really kind of hit home where you can tell. It was kind of a big deal just having ash on your car.

Diana: Did the streetlights help?

Lindsey: Yeah. You could see with the streetlights, so it wasn't too bad at 2 in the morning. Things had cleared off a little bit. But I mean, just the smell even in our house.

Diana: Could you still see flames?

Lindsey: I didn't see flames around town from where I was at because I was kind of in the middle of town.

Diana: You didn't go looking?

Lindsey: I thought that if I went looking it was going to trigger some bad... not bad emotions, but it wasn't something I wanted to confront head on.

Diana: Safer to go home?

Lindsey: Yeah, exactly.

Diana: Have you've been around wildfires before? I mean you've dispatched in the past when they have had fires that they've gone out to, grass fires and stuff. How was this fire different?

Lindsey: Yeah, this one's been way different in that I've dispatched a lot of fires, and sometimes they go on for a couple hours. This fire was a little bit different in that there is such a desperate need for help, it seemed, because we've always been able to... Not always, I can't say always, but it seems like in the past there's been a lot of help readily available. All of our surrounding counties had been dealing with other fires, but this time it just seemed so desperate because there was no extra help. We didn't have a safety net. Dispatch knew it. The firemen knew it, and we were all just trying to communicate as efficiently as we could without letting on that this was bad.

We had never dealt with this kind of bad fire before. Well, not since I've been dispatching anyway, which will be eight years in February. So we'd had a three-mile fire, I think. It seems like three miles was a big deal for me when I was a younger dispatcher. It sounds like nothing compared to the acreage we had with these fires. Like three acres, that's not anything!

So I just remember it being kind of neat because the sheriff's office got to take out ATV's and I was like, "That's cool." This fire was just completely different.

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

Lindsey: I really feel like all of the Clark County Firefighters did their best. I really can't rule out one over the other.

I think Englewood Fire was on point in trying to help early on with their mutual aid. It seems like they're always very perceptive to the world around them as far as wildfires go. Not that the other agencies aren't, but it just seems like... I don't know if it's their resources or what, but they do seem to do a lot of mutual aid.

But really, I can't put my finger on who exactly had helped out the most, because when you're on the radio, you only hear unit numbers. So you can't really tell which agency you're hearing the most and you're not recognizing voices as much. However, my hat's totally off to Kansas. Colorado sticks out to me because I think it's amazing that we had people traveling out of state to come help us. That was a pretty neat deal.

Diana: So I know they had extra law enforcement like from Meade County and in different counties around come in and help patrol. Did you have anybody come in and dispatch with you?

Lindsey: No, we just had local dispatch. Yeah, we had things... I mean, once things calmed down and became more normalized, it wasn't so much of a big deal. We're so used to multitasking with Clark County being a small agency, that if we have to do this, that and the other thing at the same time, it's not as crazy as putting someone in a situation where they've only dispatched EMS or they've only dispatched fire. I feel like our dispatchers are kind of a different breed in that we do a little bit of everything. So we're a little bit easier to evolve and take on new tasks.

Diana: So did you have any effect from the fire like in your job? Was there a physical effect or a way that you handle stuff now? Did it show some weaknesses in how you dispatch or how we get ready for an emergency or anything? Did anything come out?

Lindsey: Yeah, I think that it definitely showed how important moving forward with technology is, because once we had the command set up with 800 digital radio, the communication was so much better. We've got to move forward and be progressive with our technology to improve communications, because the old ways of having everybody talk at once on the VHF where it's staticky and you could lose your signal...

That's one of the hardest things for dispatch, because you're trying to listen to them talk about their flat tire and then trying to talk to someone on the 911 phone about who-knows-what emergency... Just being on an 800 and eliminating some of the extra chatter really is helpful.

Then again, I mentioned the National Weather Service and working more with them on getting notifications out. We didn't realize they were such a useful resource. I think that it really improved our relationship with other agencies in the area and not just with the sheriff's office or fire but also EMS and the Weather Service and other agencies that you wouldn't even think of. Even the phone companies and different things like that. They really are trying to step up and help prevent this in the future. So it is definitely a learning experience for a lot of people in Southwest Kansas in general.

Diana: So have you been involved in some of the round table discussions that they had afterwards of the people that had helped with different parts of the fire?

Lindsey: The only thing I was really involved with was kind of the command center dispatch for a couple of days. Then we had kind of... I don't want to call it therapy, but we had kind of a nice meeting in the library where we had EMS, fire, law enforcement, to just talk about it.

Diana: Kind of like a debriefing?

Lindsey: Yeah. Yeah, that's a better way to put it. It was a debriefing. And just to have that debriefing where we got together and shared our experience in person just made a... I don't think it made a huge difference, but it was just such a better emotional connection. It just helped process things better.

Diana: Did it help you understand what everybody was doing and how it kind of all fit together?

Lindsey: Yeah, absolutely. I really hope that we can have more discussions. We shouldn't wait for big disasters for EMS, fire and dispatchers to get together and officers as well.

Diana: You're talking not just the leaders, you're talking everybody?

Lindsey: Yes, because I think it helps to have a face behind the voice, not that we're going to be any less... oh fast or whatever.

Diana: If you can put a face to the voice that helps you dispatch better?

Lindsey: I think that it helps communicate with less emotion almost, because you know who you're talking to and you don't... Maybe some people would be different than me, but for me, knowing someone, I can relax a little bit more. I don't go from extremes thinking about what's going on and I'm just like, "Oh, I know this person. I know they can handle this. Here's the information I need to give them."

I do kind of handle myself professionally in that way with people I don't know, but personally I just feel like it's nice to have a connection with the people that I talk to every day.

Diana: So did you, from having that debriefing meeting, find out more about what happened and how things evolved from other people's perspective? Did it make you have a better understanding?

Lindsey: Yeah, it really did because with the 911, you're wondering where the firemen are all the time because they can't just tell you their location every single time while they're at a fire. They might move several miles without even telling you. So it was kind of interesting being in the debriefing and understanding the fire and EMS and just the scope of everything. Where they were at, the area they were covering.

We know that on paper, but to get that idea of what they were doing for how long and just kind of the behind-the-scenes, it really made everything a little bit more real and put things into perspective a little bit better. So I thought it was very helpful.

Diana: So can you perceive anything positive that has come out of the fire?

Lindsey: I hate to... I mean, there was so much loss, but I don't want to be so negative. I think one of the most positive things that came out of it is that we've got better protocol for 911 and fire and EMS and emergency preparedness.

Now that this has happened, we've got things on books. We've got more resources. As far as the environment goes, I feel like the land looks better. It's beautiful, but I'm not a farmer. I don't really know those things, but I'm hoping that it helped environmentally a little bit maybe.

I do feel like that it has helped us as a community kind of get closer together and know that there are

resources and people out there wanting to help and are willing to help. No matter who you are, or where you are from. I feel like that was kind of a positive outlook, just knowing that there's so many kindhearted helpful people out there. It's a shame that it takes tragedy sometimes to find these things, but I feel like that is one positive that we got out of this.

Diana: So you said when you went to the incident command center that you got to meet with some of the firefighters from outside of Kansas that came. Did you get to talk with them about how their experience here was different than some of their experiences other places that they've been a strike team?

Lindsey: Well, unfortunately, I didn't get a whole lot of time talking because I was working. It did seem like the difference in terrain was different for them. I mean they had to use different equipment. They're used to scaling mountains but maybe not so used to... I mean it is a different terrain for them. I'm sure that they were constantly talking about how well receptive we were in Ashland and how they weren't used to people just waving. It's like every single person in town knew exactly who they were and just everybody waved like we all knew each other.

They talked mostly about how hospitable we were, or Ashland people are, Clark County as a whole really. I think that was one of the big things. They were giving us a lot of compliments on how nice and receptive and thankful and hospitable we were towards them.

Diana: As a dispatcher, did you have any involvement with the volunteers that brought hay and that type of stuff in?

Lindsey: Oh yeah, we had a lot of people call the sheriff's office wanting to donate items. They didn't know where they should put things. We had a woman call who donated a couple thousand dollars' worth of Tupperware towards the people who had lost their things in the fire.

We handled all those calls but we were trying to connect to the right people and make sure that items got to where they needed to be. I mean, it was kind of crazy for a while because we were handling both people needing resources, people wanting to give resources, and then your dang'd ole' office sales calls.

Diana: Back to normal.

Lindsey: Yeah, exactly.

Diana: So did you know where or did you have a list of places for those donations to go? How did you find out where to take that stuff?

Lindsey: We had some people call in and let us know the Ashland Feed and Seed seemed to be a major hub for a while. That was really nice. Then like with the Tupperware, we actually had the courthouse call to let us know that they had some extra space available to house some things there. But really it seemed like people kind of called us and we were able to get a list down of what needed to go where and we had like a whole piece of paper printed out with hay and farm equipment needs to go here, food and clothing needs to go here... And you know, we would try to assist the public the best way we could with the information coming in to us.

Diana: So about how long did you field calls like that?

Lindsey: Oh gosh, we were having people helping us clear into April, I think. It seemed like the first week we were constantly getting calls from people wanting to help. We had people all the way across the country wanting to bring in hay or whatever they could. I mean it was impressive.

I actually took a trip that spring to go see my brother in Lawrence, and I counted 13 hay trucks on my way to Lawrence headed toward... I mean, it seemed like they were headed toward Ashland because that was the route that I was taking to Lawrence every time, so they're just going the opposite direction. Well, there's one,

there's another one, just counting them off! So it was just awesome.

Diana: Since going through this experience, what can you do or have you done to prepare for a future fire or emergency? You yourself personally or in your job?

Lindsey: At my job, I've been going to different conferences and kind of seeing what other counties have done with their fire and EMS dispatch. I've been taking some extra courses for general dispatch, not just the fire. I want to be... I don't feel like we were under-prepared, but I feel like we were caught off guard just a little bit.

So just to make things easier, I did get more involved with wanting to further my education. I took a 911 course in Dodge City with Ford County that was just amazing. I went to a conference in Newton, Kansas over the fall that had a different conference theme. It wasn't fire related though. I was a little bit disappointed, but I've been trying to further my education in dispatch.

Diana: Was it a kind of emergency preparedness?

Lindsey: Yeah, and they kind of focused more on like tornado and weather stuff, which I feel like we have a pretty good grasp on.

I've heard that they're kind of interested in updating the tornado sirens to do more specifically for fire preparedness, which I also think could be kind of helpful too. And then personally, I feel like I've actually been more... I don't want to say relaxed, because I don't want to insult people who have been hurt by the fire, but I feel like after this whole experience... I feel like I could handle the situation in a calmer manner. If I had to be evacuated, I would know what to do. I feel a little bit more at ease in the future. Just having this experience, maybe I can even help other people in the future. Like if... I don't think I want to work anywhere else, but I could share my experience with other agencies through these conferences. I think that's really important, sharing information with other agencies.

Diana: So what about the community? What can it do to be better prepared?

Lindsey: I think the community really needs to have more trust in the fire, EMS and sheriff's office agencies. I think there seemed to be a lot of hesitation when we did do the evacuation. I mean, of course people are going to be scared, but I just really want people to know that Clark County really does have the residents' best interests in mind. It's hard to leave family and animals and your home behind, but I feel like there's a little bit more trust in the information we put out. It could help people be a little bit better prepared.

Diana: How do you think this would have worked out if it had been Minneola instead of Ashland that had to evacuate?

Lindsey: I don't know! I honestly, with my dispatch history, I feel like it probably could have been worse. Only because US 54 is such a high traffic highway. If they were using that for evacuation from a dispatch point of view, I feel like that could have caused a lot of traffic accidents. I feel like we would have had a lot more casualties from people out of state who don't know what to do in a fire situation.

Diana: Or didn't know there was a fire.

Lindsey: Yeah, I think that would have been disastrous. I really don't think that would have gone well. So I would hate to imagine that happening, but I feel like we could. We have resources with KHP, the Kansas Highway Patrol, and the surrounding agencies that are a little bit closer to like Meade County and Ford County; the county lines are a lot closer to Minneola. With such a busy highway, I think that we would have more resources to contain something like that.

But if you wanted to say that same date, I don't think it would not have been good, because Ford County had their own things going on, so did Meade, and so did Comanche and Kiowa. It would have been not fun.

Diana: There wouldn't have been really any place for them to go?

Lindsey: No, I don't think so. And you know, especially having all that out-of-state traffic on the highway, I mean that would have been a mess. We would have had calls from angry people wanting to get through Minneola and not understanding why. Goodness, I would not have liked that.

Diana: So the group of people that got together on the Sunday following the fire, I think that's when they set up the volunteer staff, the donations to go to the Ashland Feed and Seed and the person to coordinate all those volunteers. Do you think that was helpful or could it have been handled better or maybe if we had had that in place earlier, something that was part of our emergency preparedness? Would it have made a difference?

Lindsey: I think it would have been helpful if we had something in place earlier on, only because it just seems like there were some individuals who had so much on their plate and they were just... I mean it was hard for them to focus on work because they were working on the volunteer job and it would have been nice to have something in place to just get some relief for these kind-hearted people that you know were really burning the midnight oil just trying to help their community.

I don't want to name any names because I'm really bad with names for one, but I know for a fact there were at least three or four women that were just totally in control but had so much... I mean, not only control, I wouldn't say that, because I don't know for sure.

But I know that they were just really busting their backs just trying to help. It would have been nice if we had a plan and some more relief because we also were accumulating stuff that we didn't necessarily need here. We needed more in Englewood, or you know maybe we needed more of this kind of thing or that. However, these people just were so great at organizing things and just doing the best they could.

Diana: How much do you think Facebook helped or hindered?

Lindsey: Oh, I think Facebook helped a lot actually because for me it's easier to get information on my phone just right then and there, than to wait for the news to come on or wait for the paper. I feel like that instant update really kind of helped.

As far as hindering, it was kind of a problem when there were a lot of rumors going around like people were trying to get into Ashland early after the evacuation because of Facebook. It was like, "No, you do need to follow protocol. It was on the news."

Diana: The people who were told their houses had burned that hadn't or the amount of clothing that they were asking for on Facebook?

Lindsey: Oh, I don't know that I heard anything about that.

Diana: They were bringing donations down.

Lindsey: Okay, there were so many people willing to help though. I think it was just so warming. It made me very thankful to be living in Ashland because it's just awesome to see a community as tight knit as us.