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By JESSICA CRAWFORD

- Daily Leader

Anytime an event of great magnitude, such as the Rent-A-Center fire, occurs – rumors are bound to fly.

Rumors attacking Wal-Mart and the way manager Mike Wyrick supposedly treated the wife of Liberal Fire Chief Kelly Kirk were hurtful to all involved, and was even published as a “Letter to the Editor” in a three-day-a-week periodical in Liberal that’s owned by an Alabama corporation.

Kirk was the first man wanting to set the record straight and jumped to Wyrick’s defense. Kirk said the entire situation was nothing more than a misunderstanding.



The rumor: Wyrick told Mrs. Kirk she could not charge items – Gatorade and water – to Wal-Mart because the fire department did not have an account, regardless of the fact the LFD was fighting a rather substantial fire nearby at the time.

The truth is best told by Chief Kirk himself.

“It is not uncommon for firefighters’ wives to get stuff and bring it to us at the fire,” Kirk said. “That was one of the first things she did when I called her after the fire calmed down and things were slowing down a bit. I called her and told her what had happened and said, ‘Hey, we might be here a long time, so I might ask you to bring us some stuff.’ She said, ‘Just call me and let me know.’”

“Sure enough, it was about lunch and I had our firefighters and the county firefighters, so I thought it was time to start thinking about some food and drinks for these guys,” he explained. “I called her and knew she was getting ready to go to lunch. We had made some other arrangements for some sandwiches. I had given her the keys to my office and told her to get my Wal-Mart charge card and go over there and ask them to take it. I knew she couldn’t sign for it, but I would go do that as soon as I got the opportunity. Her answer to me was, ‘No, rather than just make two trips since I am on my lunch hour, I will just run over to Wal-Mart and see if they will just let me run in there and bring it back to you, and then you can go back and take care of it later. I will tell them that you will be over there later.’”

Before Wyrick could say no or be persuaded to allow Mrs. Kirk to gather the items to be paid for later, Chief Kirk’s aunt, a Wal-Mart employee, stepped in to personally pay for the Gatorade and water.

“My aunt was on her way back into work, from lunch, she saw my wife there, got the stuff, paid for it and sent it over,” Kirk said. “She refused to give my wife the receipt and let her pay for it.”

Anyone familiar with Wal-Mart is aware of the amount of time it takes to finish shopping, pay, get to the car and leave the parking lot. This time frame would be added to drastically in the event of an argument or altercation with management of any kind. However, Kirk’s wife was out of the store and back on scene with Gatorade and water 10 minutes after the two had spoke on the phone. Little did she know, rumors of the day’s events were already beginning to circulate.

“My wife didn’t even know that anything was going on until later that night when I told her some of the rumors I was hearing,” Kirk said. “She was surprised, too.”

The nasty rumor also found its way to the ears of Wyrick. Although he was unable to comment officially on the situation, he was very disappointed and quick to call Kirk with an apology.

“I talked to Mike Wyrick after this happened, and he called me apologizing for the whole situation,” Kirk said. “He said that he didn’t understand that it was the fire department that was asking. So I think it was a miscommunication, the way I understand it.

“What he told me is that I could have had anything in this store if I wanted it that day,” he added. “If I needed it, he would have provided it for us.”

Kirk further explained the many, many times Wal-Mart has proven their support for the LFD along with many other local entities.

“In the past, I can’t even count how many times they have awarded us \$1,000 or more in their community grants,” he said. “I know a lot of folks in the community get those and we get them, too.

“One of the biggest charities fire fighters try to support is the Muscular Dystrophy Association and we do Boot Blocks,” he continued. “It is not very safe to put people in intersections anymore doing Boot Blocks because it is a high-traffic area, we do our Boot Block usually in front of Wal-Mart. They have always been good to us to let us stand in front of their store and get donations in our boots for muscular dystrophy. When we did the muscular dystrophy golf tournament, they were generous by donating gift cards as prizes. We have always had a great relationship with them, and I hope this doesn’t do anything to damage that.”

Although there is some accuracy to the rumor pitting Wal-Mart against the LFD, the truth reveals what transpired that day between Kirk’s wife and Wyrick was nothing but a misunderstanding.

“From what I understand, the details of the letter are pretty accurate,” Kirk said. “He was

reluctant to just let my wife take the stuff and come back later to pay, but I don't think he understood who he was dealing with, that is what I believe.

"I don't think there are very many businesses in this town, if any, that if I would have walked in there or sent a firefighter in there, with that situation and ask for some sort of assistance and said, 'We will take care of you later,'" he added. "I don't think anyone of them would have turned us down."

Daily Leader managing editor Larry Phillips said the Leader did not run the same letter to the editor for several reasons.

"The main reason was it's against our policy since it had a specific consumer complaint against a private business," Phillips said. "We publish – quite often – our requirements for letters to the editor on our op-ed page. It reads in part, 'Letters may address any topic or area of interest, but cannot be libelous or contain specific consumer complaints against a private business.' Though Wal-Mart is huge, it's still a private business. While the Leader appreciated receiving letters defending the fire fighters, the Leader helps those who write letters to the editor by checking the facts prior to publication.

"I called the lady and explained our requirements, and she understood," Phillips said. "I told her we were following up on the alleged incident, but in subsequent unsuccessful attempts to contact her, we were unable to find out where she got her information. She apparently didn't know it was inaccurate, and she told me it had angered her – and I don't blame her, I would be, too, if it were correct.

"Another thing – I had personally asked Chief Kirk about the complaint Tuesday, the day after the fire, and he was totally unaware of it. We had a reporter bring up the question again with Kirk in front of other media representatives on Wednesday while inspectors were combing through the rubble, and they all heard Chief Kirk say that it did not happen like that," Phillips added. "There's no way we would intentionally print a letter the following day knowing full well the letter wasn't totally correct. It wouldn't be fair to the fire department, Wal-Mart or to the person who wrote the letter. If we thought it was inaccurate, we had a responsibility to check it out thoroughly. To not do so, and to run it knowing it was inaccurate would be unethical – period."

Wal-Mart Media Relations Manager Ashley Hardie personally issued a statement regarding the matter, reiterating the support Wal-mart does, and always, will provide for its community.

“Wal-Mart has a long history of supporting local emergency response teams,” Hardie said. “Our police and fire departments know they can count on us as willing partners when they need help. We always appreciate the way they serve our store, our community and our customers.”

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