Sherry Helmke works at her desk recently as the branch manager for the Southwestern Kansas Red Cross. She and her husband, Henry, have decided to move to Dallas to be close to their new grandchild. Helmke did say she has already contacted the Dallas Red Cross office because she plans to still volunteer for the organization. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

She’s seen the worst life hands out. She’s seen the best in humanity. Now, local Red Cross branch manager Sherry Helmke is going to see whether there’s life after retirement. The lifelong Liberal resident who’s worked to ensure emergency services in the western Kansas chapter of the national organization will resign her position at the end of August.

“I’m not retiring because of the job,” Helmke said. Once she was “bitten by the bug” of disaster

relief services, she said, she's never looked back, experienced burnout or resented the demands of the job. "I still love this job. But this is a personal decision, a family decision."

Helmke's husband, Henry, retired last year from his work as director of a local drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. He'd worked there nearly 40 years. Earlier this summer, the Helmkes became first-time grandparents. Both events caused them to take a fresh look at how they'd like to spend the next several years.

"We'd like to get down there to see our grandson more often," she said. "In fact, we plan to move to Dallas, where he lives, with our daughter and her husband."

Though a life as retired grandparents, starting over in a major metropolitan area, is drastically different than Helmke's time as a Liberal native, she's unfazed by the adjustments to come.

"It feels like the right time, and things are working out," she said. "Our kids have been after us to do this for a long time, and they're really excited."

The changes of life are nowhere more evident than in the work of disaster relief, where a person's entire existence can take a 180-degree turn in mere hours.

In a smaller sense, that same sudden change occurred when Helmke came to the local Red Cross, 10 and a half years ago.

"I was tricked into it," she said with a laugh. "The former manager, Jan Toot, had been doing the work for a long time, and she was ready to retire. My husband was on the Red Cross board, and he encouraged me to apply. I had no idea what I was getting into."

Helmke started work four days after the May 15, 2003, tornado in the Liberal area, which also spawned a massive hailstorm in nearby Kismet.

“It was an immediate training in hands-on work,” she said. “At that time, the Red Cross didn’t have a lot of classes in place for local volunteers, so they had to send people down from Garden City. None of us knew what we were doing. That’s totally different now.”

During her tenure at the Liberal office, Helmke has focussed on equipping local people in Liberal and the 33 outlying communities in Seward, Meade, Morton and Stevens Counties to face emergencies with confidence.

“Right now, I’m making sure all the emergency shelters in the towns are set up, meeting Red Cross national standards,” she said. “That’s one of the big jobs I have to finish up next week.”

Helmke boosted local support throughout Western Kansas by making frequent appearance to speak at civic clubs and community events. She offered CPR training classes, first aid training, disaster relief classes, and organized blood drives.

“I’ve been busy, and sometimes it felt like a one-woman show!” she joked. “But I didn’t do any of it alone. I couldn’t have done any of it without the volunteers.”

Helmke herself completed deployments to Florida in 2005, in the aftermath of hurricane damage, and Fort Collins, Colo., to help provide wildfire relief. Though it was much closer at hand, the devastating effects of the Greensburg tornado earned the same focussed attention to relief and recovery. She’s just as proud of the emergency response teams she helped organize, sending local relief to New Jersey survivors of Hurricane Sandy, people who weathered Hurricane Katrina, and, most recently, the people of Moore, Okla., which sustained the worst tornado damage in recent history.

Helmke said everywhere she goes, she’s inspired by how the worst circumstances bring out the best in people.

“The communities are right there, ready to help,” she said. “Sometimes, we’ll show up with

water, or first aid kits, or help with clean-up, and they'll say, 'no, no, don't worry about me. My neighbor across the street has a worse problem.' They're so humble and so kind."

If Helmke has a favorite mode, however, it would have to be the Red Cross response to families whose homes have burned down.

"We go there immediately, once we get the call from the fire department," she said. "We take care of that family, whatever they've lost, whatever they need. I'm there each time, and that's important."

Life, she observes, can change quickly. Then it matters who a person's neighbors are, and whether effective help is available. The Red Cross makes the most of both elements.

"I'm really concerned that our local office continue, and stay strong," she said. It's not clear at this time what the national Red Cross administration plans for the Liberal office, but Helmke said she and her Garden City supervisor are determined to keep local services in place.

"We have no idea at this time, what that will mean, because the Red Cross itself is in transition," she said. "We've written letters and spoken up and we will keep at it with help from local groups. We've had a lot of help in this from the Chamber of Commerce and from the United Way. Liberal has a strong volunteer group. It's part of our community, and we want it to continue."

As for Helmke herself, Red Cross days aren't completely over. She's already made contact with Red Cross offices in the Dallas area, because "I intend to keep working as a volunteer," she said. "You get started in this kind of work, and most people don't want to stop. I know I don't."