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When You Need a Hand

by J. Reed Anderson, Editor
Thirteen Towns

It's spring. It's late. Winter was longer, hanging on around the edges of April and May with scraps of snow, crumbs of frosty nights and cold rainy mornings. What little sunshine that's come has dried the fields, and not to the bone dry that billows up from behind a tractor like some dust storm hoping to darken the sky. Just dry, so that sign of an approaching car on a dirt road can be seen before the car comes into view, or field work getting done can be seen from a short way off. But it's spring and it's late. And it's time to plant.



Across the section, a mile away, the silhouette of a John Deere is rolling a field. Here, closer to the house, another John Deere is pulling a drill planting soybeans. "Kevin's still in Fosston getting his chemo," says Mike Vettleson, his brother. "Man, it just came out of nowhere. In February he went in because he had pneumonia, and in the X-rays they found lung cancer, and he didn't come home for six weeks. It's really scary. He's only 47."

To the east, the silhouette has turned, making another pass south, a small hazy cloud following behind. The other tractor, turbo howling, rumbles past a hundred yards or so to our west. Here in the drive by one of the shops, as the tractor goes north, Mike says, "I don't know how he hooked up with these guys, but if they are what they say they are, I'm impressed. I usually take some time off from my job in Roseau to help with spring planting and in the fall for harvest, and because of what's going on, I took a little more time this year. But these guys coming in to help plant has really taken some pressure off Kevin."



I think when most people think of "non-profit" entities, corporations like Minnesota Public Radio, or ACORN, or the Sierra Club come to mind: large corporations whose non-profit status is simply a marketing ploy to take a tax advantage of larger profits and taxpayer largesse. But there truly are non-profit organizations. Think of the Salvation Army. And think now of Farm

Rescue. Organizations that keep their administrative and overhead costs as little as possible, work chiefly with volunteers, and spending the money they receive directly on projects, communities, and people. Not on purchasing radio stations and catalog companies, union ownership, and film production.

The Kevin and Kim Vettleson farm is located northwest of Trail, Minn. "Wheat and soybeans," says Kevin. "I've tried all sorts of other things in the past: popcorn, canola, raising grass seed. In the Eighties we raised a lot of sunflowers, until disease wiped them out. Now it's wheat and soybeans. That's pretty much what all of us around here grow now."

Kevin, by his own admission and pride, doesn't look like a cancer patient. He's not gaunt and thin, he's large and he's still got his hair. "The chemo has thinned it a little," he says as he runs a hand across the top of his head.



"I found out in February I had lung cancer," Kevin said. "I went down to the U of M in the Cities, and, well I'm glad I stayed there. I was there six weeks undergoing treatment, and that was tough. I'm a country boy, and the city is no place for me. But the first thing and the last thing on my mind was this farm. What was I going to do? How was I going to do it?" His farm insurance agent suggested he contact Bill Gross at Farm Rescue.

"I got a hold of them," said Kevin, "put in a request, and waited. That was in April. I didn't hear anything for a couple of weeks, and thought that I'd been turned down. And then a couple of weeks ago, Bill called and said they'd be in the area, and did I still need the help. This is all pretty amazing. This is all done by volunteers, and some still have regular jobs."

Bill Gross is an airline pilot during the rest of the year. "I grew up on a farm in North Dakota," he said. "I went to college, became a pilot, but never left my roots. I started Farm Rescue to help farmers who've been injured or, like Kevin, have had an illness that could keep them from making a living. We have two paid staff members in Jamestown, but everyone else, including me, is a volunteer. None of us takes a dollar. I take time off in the spring to help with planting, and in the fall to help with harvesting."

Bill is a good organizer, though. Every piece of equipment Farm Rescue uses is donated. RDO Equipment donates the field equipment. Several truck dealerships donate the pickups they use. And Farm Rescue has a couple of crews around Minnesota and North Dakota. Bremer Bank and WalMart are two of the largest cash contributors to Farm



Kevin Vettleson (left) speaks with Farm Rescue founder Bill Gross.

Rescue. "Fuel is our biggest cost," said Bill.

But Farm Rescue isn't a charitable organization. "We don't give out money," said Bill. "If your farm is in financial trouble, we're not going to give you money to save it. We help families in a crisis, either from some kind of serious injury or illness."

"If you're facing bankruptcy," said Kevin, "they won't help save it. You have to have a viable farm operation for them to help."

"We helped 26 farmers plant last year," said Bill, "and 20, I think, harvest. This spring we're helping 22 farmers plant. Last week we were in Starbuck helping a family. He had medical problems, and then she had a stroke, and they're both in their thirties, early forties. Plus, they have a special-needs child. Next week we're in Climax, and then to Northwood."

"And this is done by volunteers," said Kevin. "People who have jobs already."

"Last month," said Bill, "we had a couple of guys come in from Pennsylvania and Kentucky. They heard about us, about what we do, and took some vacation time just to come out here and help plant."

"I know, that's just incredible," said Kevin.

"And farmers aren't the easiest people to help," said Bill. "They're pretty independent." Kevin laughed. "That's a fact," he said, "we're awfully independent. I'm awfully independent, and it's tough having all these people around, doing the work I usually do by myself, with one hired guy and my brother."

Bill Gross's volunteers planned on being done and gone by Friday. They'd have around 700 acres seeded and rolled, which will leave about 1,800 acres for Kevin. "It'll be a big help," said Kevin. "Was a big help, especially at this stage of my chemo. But we can manage the rest on our own. They need to get going. There're a lot more people out there a lot worse off than I am."

{Editor's Note: Anyone interested in learning more about Farm Rescue can go to their website, www.farmrescue.org.}