



Help Thy Neighbor

VOLUNTEERS PITCH IN WHEN FARMERS FIND THEMSELVES IN TROUBLE.

BY MICHAEL HAEDERLE



The Kappenmans could see the tornado coming: first an ominous black wall of clouds moving toward their South Dakota farm, then a moment of dead calm. Damian and Martha Kappenman raced to the cellar, where they rode out the storm, listening to the eerie screech of their farmhouse windows vibrating in 200 mph winds. When they came out late on the afternoon of August 24, 2006, they encountered sheer devastation. The quarter-mile-wide tornado had shredded trees, killed 40 head of cattle, and shattered every building in its path: barns, steel grain bins, and the family's 56-year-old farmhouse. "To see there was nothing left," Damian says softly, "that was almost unbearable."

The couple had no insurance. Their machinery was mangled. There was nothing to do but lease their 640-acre farm,

bury the debris, and find jobs. Then Bill Gross called.

Four years ago Gross, 42, created Farm Rescue, a group of volunteers who help farmers beset by accidents, ill health, or natural disasters by planting and harvesting during the spring and fall seasons.

For the Kappenmans, his call meant they had a chance to get back on their feet—and they took it. The help meant more than restarting a business; it was an opportunity to reclaim a way of life. Damian's grandfather had homesteaded the farm. Martha, 50, grew up just down the road. "Without Farm Rescue there would have been no possibility," says Damian, 53. "It's as simple as that."

For the volunteers who came to the Kappenmans' last spring to plant wheat and soybeans and who came back in October to bring in the harvest, it was hard

work. But they didn't mind. "The Good Lord didn't put us on this earth just to help ourselves, but to help our fellow man," says Gene Spichke, 73, a Baptist deacon. "The satisfaction of helping people who are hurting is a reward in itself. We probably get more out of it than they do."

Gross got the idea for Farm Rescue in an unlikely place: the pilot seat of the 747 he flies for United Parcel Service. High above the Midwest, he would fret about families forced from their land. He knew a great deal about their plight. Growing up on a farm near Cleveland, North Dakota, he had seen too many farmers lose everything. "Farmers don't have such things as sick leave or disability insurance," he says. "Some don't even have medical insurance."

Raised as a Methodist, he says his parents had instilled an ethic of service in him. "I believe the Scripture not only requires faith, it requires works. Putting your faith to work is really what it is all about."

At first Gross thought about simply volunteering his own services during vacations. But a friend convinced him to "think bigger" and create a nonprofit (farmrescue.org). The idea appealed to Gross, who had been on three missions to Eastern Europe sponsored by the University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, where he lives. In Croatia he engaged in "large-scale Bible study"; in Romania he worked with orphans. "It was mostly spending time with young children to show them that someone cares," he says. "We gave them a sense of hope that they are special and important to God."

Even so, he wanted to help people in another way. There must be something I can do that other people don't know how to do, he recalls thinking at the time. So he

"I've had farmers say when we show up, it erases the worries from their minds and lifts the burdens from their shoulders," says Bill Gross, above, founder of Farm Rescue.



"Losers" Fuel a Church

It gets cold in Newfields, New Hampshire. The average low in January is 13 degrees, and February is worse. So heating a church, one built in the 1880s, can be expensive. This year the 50-member Newfields Community Church was particularly worried, says Pastor Jean Bass. "We

didn't want to have to scrimp on our mission budget to keep the church going."

But then four parishioners hit on a novel plan: a weight-loss pledge drive called Pounds for Petrol. Much like a walkathon, participants find sponsors to make donations pegged to each pound lost. A dozen participants

signed up—no easy decision considering the public weigh-ins. "It took a lot of courage and humility," Bass says. "There was one woman who had never told her husband what she weighed."

The "losers" pulled in big gains—\$4,074—enough to heat the 125-seat wood-frame church this past winter. Plus they had fun, and ended up healthier, says Bass. "They committed to their own health while committing to the health and life of the church." Lose, lose equals win, win.

began raising funds and finding volunteers—often at farm trade shows.

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Today he has 50 volunteers in the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Montana, an annual budget of \$300,000, and more than 100 regular donors, including churches, small businesses, Wal-Mart, and RDO Equipment Co., which provides farm machinery for the group. So far Farm Rescue has helped 67 farmers—half of them in 2008 alone.

Now Gross hopes to expand into Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska. "When I started, people said, 'Bill, you don't realize what you're getting into.' They were right," he says. "It has grown much larger and faster than I ever expected. But I see it continuing to grow." ●

BY THE NUMBERS

14 Number of tornadoes that struck the Dakotas and Minnesota on August 24, 2006.

249 Deaths on American farms in 2007. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics considers agriculture one of the country's most dangerous occupations.

33,000 Injuries that disabled U.S. farmers the same year

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