

Iowa Farm & Ranch

Section

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Farm Rescue mission helps farm families in need



A volunteer with Farm Rescue helps plant a field in 2013. Photo submitted

Rural communities also benefit

by Gordon Wolf

A person has a lot of time to think when logging windshield hours – about life, about family and about the future.

Bill Gross often thinks about these things as he travels – only his windshield hours occur miles above the earth, in the stratosphere, as a Boeing 747 captain for United Parcel Service.

On some trips Gross thought about his mission trips through the Presbyterian Church to Romania and Croatia where he helped rebuild houses, conducted Bible studies and worked in orphanages.

“There must be something I can do back home,” he said to himself.

About seven years ago he was flying over the ocean when the subject of life after retirement arose.

“On a 12- to 14-hour flight you have a lot of time to talk,” said Gross, age 47. “I was in my late 30s at that time and said

I was going to get a John Deere planter and plant crops for farmers as a random Good Samaritan.”

The idea was to help farmers in his home state of North Dakota.

The image of some crazy old guy planting crops for other people evoked laughter from the other pilots in the cockpit. But the idea struck home for Gross, and for a very good reason. As a teenager growing up near Cleveland, North Dakota, he had seen the need in the rural area.

His parents, hit by financial trouble, had to sell a portion of their farm, which Gross’s grandfather had homesteaded. That was during the farm crisis of the 1980s and other farm families in the area had done the same thing and had moved away. That meant fewer farm children to fill seats in the classrooms, forcing the closure of the school in Cleveland. Gross had to finish his senior year of high school through correspondence.

With the exodus of farm families and the school closure, the business community in Cleveland began to dissolve. The grocery store, café, gas station, vehicle repair shop and other businesses all closed. Today Cleveland consists of an elevator and a few residences, said Gross.

Some time after the conversation with his colleagues, Gross was having dinner with a former college roommate, who had also been an Army chaplain, and the subject of retirement came up. The friend asked Gross how many more years he would work for UPS before he retired, and Gross spoke of his dream to become a Good Samaritan farm helper.

“Instead of telling me I was crazy, he said, ‘You know, Bill, I have a couple questions for you. I’m thinking, number one, why don’t you do it now? You don’t know what tomorrow is going to bring.’

“I had always thought I would do this when I retired,” said Gross. “I had never thought that I may not be around or not be physically able to farm.”

The friend’s second question was instead of randomly going around the countryside to help farmers, why not help those who are truly in need? Don’t farm accidents happen in which farmers are injured or killed? More children are leaving the farms to work in the cities and are not able to return home to help neighbors in need. And farms today are bigger, resulting in fewer families and fewer people to help a neighbor.

The friend said Gross should unify the project and develop an application and screening process.

“I had never thought about forming a non-profit organization,” said Gross. “In my mind, it was still a random Good Samaritan mission.”

Gross was less than 10 minutes down the road after the dinner with his friend when he decided that he would start a non-profit organization to help farm families in need with planting and harvesting.

“This is what I was looking for years before, a mission field,” said Gross. “I thought at the time, ‘My mission field will be in the fields of the farm families.’”

Gross worked the dream over in his mind. He would need to get other people involved – volunteers and sponsors. “Would it really work?” he asked himself.

But he reasoned other people must feel the same way he did. He thought of the many retired farmers for whom farming never left their blood. They would want to help out.

“Would businesses sponsor this?” he wondered. “I think they would because it is in their best interest for family farms to continue to operate. It is in everyone’s best interest.”

FARM RESCUE, from Page 1A

Gross started the non-profit organization Farm Rescue in 2005. That year he set up camp at farm shows to raise awareness and to find sponsors. He put his own money into the non-profit organization to get it started.

The next year, Farm Rescue helped its first farmer, a man whose right hand had been cut off in a farm accident. Farm Rescue helped nine other farm families in North Dakota that same year, 2006.

"Pretty soon we received requests from farmers in South Dakota and Minnesota, and businesses wanted to be sponsors," said Gross.

Farm Rescue has grown every year. Last year the non-profit helped 50 farm families, and the year before it helped 42 families.

"To date we've helped 252 farm families," said Gross, adding that Farm Rescue hopes to help at least 50 families in 2014.

The geographical scope of Farm Rescue has also grown. Now it is available to help farm families in the entire states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa, and the eastern part of Montana.

"We do this with a database of volunteers," Gross explained. "The first year we had three volunteers, including me, and I used my vacation time. I don't get any money from Farm Rescue and put in about 1,000 hours a year."

In fact, everyone associated with Farm Rescue is a volunteer, except for a small staff of employees and a field operations manager.

Farm Rescue now has 700 volunteers from all over the United States, among them a retired dairy farmer from Pennsylvania, retired pilots from Fed Ex and Frontier, ministers and a man who comes from Oregon to drive truck

"Our volunteers come from all walks of life. They help from two weeks to a month," Gross explained.

"Our volunteers who were farmers love meeting the other farm families and say it is better when they farmed for themselves because they don't have to worry about the finances."

Gross described the Farm Rescue effort as a big, mobile farm, planting and harvesting hundreds of thousands of acres a year.

The non-profit organization does not give money to farmers in need.

"This is not a government program," said Gross. "It's a grass-roots Good Samaritan effort. We don't get any federal funds. We do take free-will donations."

Farmers who receive the help have been injured, have an illness or were the victim of a natural disaster. The application lists the criteria, and Gross said Farm Rescue focuses on medium- to small-sized family farms.

About half the farm families that apply for help have heard about Farm Rescue or know about the non-profit organization through its website (www.farmrescue.org)

and call at 701-252-2017. To apply, farm families just fill out the application.

The other half of farm families that receive help are referred to Farm Rescue by a neighbor or a friend who provides an address and telephone number. This can be done anonymously and often is. Gross encourages people to provide contact information for farm families that aren't likely to apply for help themselves.

Farm Rescue contacts the farm families that are referred to the organization to see if they are willing to accept the help.

"In a lot of cases, when they open the door and we explain what we will do, they say, 'We could really use the help,'" Gross stated.

"Farmers are pretty independent," he added. "They are hesitant to ask for assistance. We find that especially true in Iowa."

Information on the application is kept confidential. Only Farm Rescue's board of directors, which selects the cases that have the most need, sees the applications.

Last year in Iowa, Farm Rescue helped farm families that suffered tornado destruction, a farmer who was injured in a corn-chopper accident and one who had knee-replacement surgery.

"We've helped a handful of Iowa farm families with planting and harvest, and we want to help more farm families," Gross said.

Farm Rescue does not use the farm families' equipment. The use of equipment is donated by a sponsor, RDO Equipment Company, a multi-state implement dealer.

Chevy dealers provide four-wheel-drive pickup trucks.

An Iowa sponsor, Wilson Trailer, supplies semi hopper bottom trailers to haul grain.

Other Iowa sponsors supply money. The main sponsors in Iowa are Wal-Mart, Vander Haag's Inc. of Spencer, Stine Seed, Key Cooperative, Sudenga Industries of George, Pizza Ranch and Pioneer.

"They put in the funding so we can help farm families," said Gross. "We need operating funds to mobilize our volunteers."

Gross said Farm Rescue makes it clear to volunteers that it is not a social club.

"They work long, hard hours in the field so they can help more farm families," he explained.

"We don't want to have to mobilize more volunteers than needed. If we do, it costs more money because we pay for lodging for volunteers."

The cost of traveling to the volunteer location is the volunteers' expense. Most drive, said Gross. He added that Farm Rescue does pay for some food expenses, up to \$25 a day. The rest is up to the volunteers as Farm Rescue says individuals would have food expenses even if they didn't volunteer.

"If we're planting we might use three to four volunteers who work in shifts as a team. Sometimes we plant all night long or might shut down for four to five hours at night," said Gross.

Harvesting takes more volunteers as

semis need to be driven to unload grain. Harvesting operations will take a minimum of six people, sometimes eight, depending on the situation.

"We're not at any one farm for a long time. We use the biggest equipment we can," said Gross. "A lot of times we might have a thousand acres or more to plant and we're usually out of there in a day to two days. Harvesting might take two to three long, hard days of work. That's how we're able to help 50 farm families a year."

Gross said Farm Rescue can always use more volunteers. Information for volunteers is available on non-profit organization's website.

Volunteers range in age from 18, the youngest allowable age, to a 77-year-old retired farmer and church deacon who has helped Farm Rescue since it served its first farm family.

"He still plants and harvests with us every year," said Gross.

Some families treat their volunteer time as a family vacation.

"Some families come from as far away as Florida and Kentucky. They bring their families," Gross explained. "We do have rules about keeping children away from equipment, of course, and no one under 18 can operate equipment."

While Gross and other Farm Rescue volunteers don't get any financial compensation, they receive other types of rewards for their work.

"We're helping farm families, and that helps the rural communities," said Gross. "Small, rural communities depend on agriculture in one way or another in the upper Midwest. It matters to the elevator, the banker and the fuel supplier.

"If we can help as many farm families as possible to remain on the land, it helps the communities," Gross continued. "One less farm family means less children going to the small school, one less family to buy power from the rural electric cooperative. If only a few, big corporate farms remained, and if the bank or insurance company or any other business didn't have that account, they'd be out of business."

Gross said Farm Rescue has several components to its mission. One is the tangible component that everyone sees – helping the farm family in a time of need.

"A second component is to help the farm family continue its livelihood so that it is more likely that the children and future generations will be able to stay on the land," said Gross. "It helps the rural communities, too."

And that mission is firmly rooted in Gross's memory. Because of financial trouble in the 1980s, his parents weren't able to help any of their children continue in farming.

Gross reasoned that if a farmer is injured or ill, they might have to hire people to help at a time when the family is already financially burdened with medical bills. That means the parents will be less likely to be able to help their children with

Farm Rescue now accepting applications for spring planting assistance

Farm Rescue, a nonprofit organization that provides planting and harvesting assistance free of charge to farm families that have experienced a major illness, injury or natural disaster, is now accepting planting applications from farmers in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and eastern Montana.

Farm Rescue assisted 50 farm families in 2013 and plans to assist a similar number of families as available funding and volunteer staffing allows.

"Now is the time for farmers to apply for planting assistance. Priority consideration will be given to applications received by April 1," said Bill Gross, Farm Rescue founder and president. "Friends and neighbors may also anonymously refer a family that is in need of assistance since some families are hesitant to ask for assistance themselves."

Farm Rescue introduced a Sponsor-A-Volunteer program, which will provide an avenue for potential donors to help further the nonprofit organization's mission of assisting farm families that have experienced unexpected crises. By making a donation via check or Farm Rescue's website, anyone can contribute to the important work of the good-hearted, compassionate volunteers.

"We are requesting people to consider helping us offset some volunteer costs, which in turn will allow Farm Rescue to mobilize more volunteers," said Gross. "By sponsoring a volunteer, you are helping us assist more farm families who have experienced major injury, illness or natural disaster."

Sponsor-A-Volunteer donations may be mailed to: Farm Rescue, PO Box 1100, Jamestown, North Dakota 58402.

some land or equipment.

Gross considers that he is fortunate. Because of his job, he was able later in life to purchase the family farm, which he rents out.

Gross recalled Cleveland's transition from a thriving, small community to nearly a ghost town.

"That influenced me and always troubled me – what happens to small, rural communities because of farm families moving away," he said. "I never knew what to do about it at the time, but years later, this became my way, and our volunteers' way, that we can help. Every little bit we do can help these rural communities survive. Every little bit helps."

"My hope and dream and thought is to carry forward, and thankfully, other people feel the same way, that their mission field is in the fields of farm families."



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