

To the Rescue

When farmers find themselves in need, Farm Rescue is there to lend a helping hand.

BY CLAIRE VATH



PHOTOS: GREG LATZA

Left: Farm Rescue founder Bill Gross and his team prepare for planting. Above: Bill Gross (left) with Shirley and Dave Reiffenberger on the Reiffenbergers' farm.

“He’d get over one hurdle and he was ready to go home, and he’d have a complication.”

On February 5, 2009, the Reiffenbergers’ 37th wedding anniversary, Dave came home to the farm—the sprawling acreage that five or six generations of his family have called home. But the deadline to plant was looming, and Dave didn’t have his strength back. “We were just planning day by day,” he says. “It was still the middle of winter, but we debated whether we should try to find some help.”

“I knew Dave wasn’t going to be able to do it on his own,” Shirley says. “Farming is his livelihood and I didn’t want to see him give it up.”

ENTER FARM RESCUE. When Bill

Gross hears the wind pick up and the patter of rain, he fires up the tractor. Nothing unusual about that, save for the fact that it’s 3 a.m. “We weren’t going to leave until the job was finished, and we had to keep on schedule,” he says. The field of soybeans he’s trying to get planted belongs to the Reiffenbergers.

For the past few years, Gross has been in the business of long days and late nights. In 2006, the 42-year-old North Dakota native formed a group to lend a helping hand to farmers facing injury, illness or natural disasters. Now in its third year, Farm Rescue will have helped more than 100 farms by the end of 2009.

On July 31, 2008, Dave and Shirley Reiffenberger watched in stunned silence as a windstorm blew through their Bellingham, Minn., farm. It knocked down buildings and “caused a couple hundred thousand dollars worth of damage,” says Dave, who farms 950 acres of soybeans and corn.

Soon after, though, the couple began rebuilding. “We thought 2009 was going to be a good year for us,” says Dave. But in January, Dave had emergency open-heart surgery and a series of additional setbacks.

“Your emotions kind of teeter-tottered,” says Shirley.

When the Farm Rescue volunteers arrive in the morning, Gross has been going for several hours. They relieve him of his duties and finish planting the last of the Reiffenbergers' soybean acreage. "Seeing that made us feel more that they were dedicated to completing the task they'd come to do," says Shirley.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS. A good Midwestern work ethic was instilled in Bill Gross early on. For that he credits his Cleveland, N.D., upbringing. "When I got off the school bus, I was usually out driving the tractor," he says. "You were expected to work hard from a very young age. That's the nature of being brought up on a farm."

Gross did a little of everything on the family's 6,000-acre cattle farm. But when it came time for college, his parents encouraged their children to leave home for a while. "They weren't in a financial position to help us get started with our own farming careers," says Gross.

So he traveled far from home, both on mission trips and as a professional pilot. But a little thought stuck in the back of his mind of the farm he'd left behind: "I'm going to get a big John Deere tractor and planter and be a random Good Samaritan. I'll pull up to farms in the morning and offer to help plant crops, free of charge."

A friend encouraged him to take that idea to the next level. "There are fewer family farms and fewer children who come back to farm nowadays," Gross concedes. "Farms are greater distances from each other and farm families are trying to do more with less manpower."

That big idea and a lot of farm-boy sweat equity kicked in, and Farm Rescue was born.

MONEY AND MANPOWER. Starting up, Gross knew he needed manpower and money. He reached out to hundreds of businesses, trying to solicit sponsors for support. "Business sponsors are the bread and butter of our funding," says Gross. Seventy-five percent of funds for Farm Rescue come through regional businesses. The organization provides the physical labor for those they help, but the farmers put in seed, fuel and fertilizer.

Farm Rescue does provide the equipment through RDO Equipment Company, headquartered in Fargo, N.D. "We sponsor all the equipment they use in both seeding and harvesting," says Keith Kreps, vice president of Northern Agriculture for the company. On longer-distance trips, RDO even moves the equipment on semis.

Finding manpower was easy; volunteers came out of the woodwork. Many were retired farmers or former farm kids. "These people volunteer because farming is in their blood," Gross says proudly. "I think that's why we get so much done."

For the Reiffenbergers' job, volunteers came from Pennsylvania, Kentucky and North Dakota. "The

volunteers were really helpful and willing to do anything," says Dave.

For now, Farm Rescue serves the geographic regions of North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota—with plans to increase the number of farms served in the region. Cases are chosen based on severity, area weather patterns, type of crop, location, and logistics of moving equipment and volunteers.

Once applicants are chosen, a route is designed to help the most people with the greatest need in the least amount of time, says Gross. The payoff, he adds, is seeing farm families get assistance during a crisis. "In the intangible sense," he says, "I know we're helping indirectly to keep future generations in farming."

ON THE JOB. On the foggy morning of May 12, a group of volunteers got the machinery in place at the Reiffenbergers'. Within hours, they had inspected the equipment, changed oil and filled seed. Once they got the lay of the land, Farm Rescue was off and running.

Toward evening, the volunteers stopped for dinner



The Farm Rescue team shares a meal and a blessing with Dave and Shirley Reiffenberger (far right).

while Gross took over the planting. The following day went smoothly until that evening, when the dark clouds rolled in and it started to rain. Gross raced to get the field planted, and the volunteers finished the job in the morning.

The Reiffenbergers said their goodbyes and stood looking over the planted field. The farm has been their home for the past 26 years, and they'd like to see it stay around much longer. "We're trying to set things up with our son so he can take over," says Dave, whose health is good, given all he's been through in the past year.

Meanwhile, Bill Gross and his team of Good Samaritans are quietly on their way to the next farm, equipment in tow, to help another family in need. ●

To read more about the Farm Rescue organization, visit www.farmrescue.org