

People

FLORIDA TODDLER MYSTERY

WHAT HAPPENED TO CAYLEE?

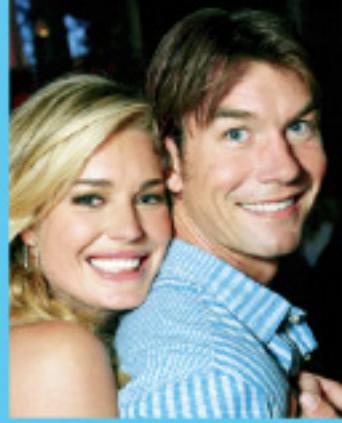
**THE CHILD:
MISSING SINCE
MID-JUNE**



**A MISSING
2-YEAR-OLD AND
A MOM UNDER
SUSPICION**

- New details
- Heartbreaking family photos

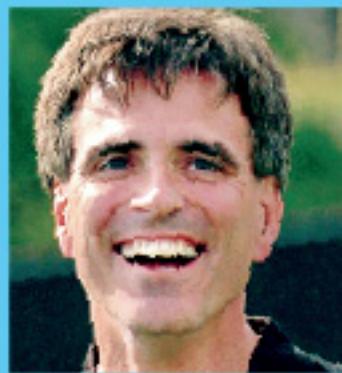
THE MOM: IN CUSTODY



**REBECCA ROMIJN &
JERRY O'CONNELL**
Expecting Twin Girls!



THE GOLDEN GIRLS
Remembering
Estelle Getty



**LAST LECTURE'S
RANDY PAUSCH**
1960-2008

THE FARM RESCUER

When illness or injury threatens a farmer's livelihood, Bill Gross rolls up his sleeves and gets to work

BY JOANNE FOWLER



"I'm here to help," says Gross (at a farm in North Dakota last October).

**People
HEROES
AMONG US**

On a Wednesday evening, as the setting sun streaks orange in the North Dakota sky, Bill Gross rips open a 50-lb. bag of canola seeds, dumps them into a hopper and scrambles up into the cab of a giant tractor. "I need food," he declares, but there's no time for a dinner break: He has 160 acres to cover by morning.

But the field he's planting isn't his own. It belongs to Paul Henderson, a 46-year-old father of six who injured his back after a fall from a grain dryer; he looks on like an anxious parent. The farmer's entire annual income of \$140,000 lies in jeopardy if he doesn't plant his 1,800

acres of land. "I'd love to be able to do this myself," he says. "But I'm so thankful to Bill."

The agricultural all-nighter has become a way of life for Gross, a 42-year-old UPS pilot who, through his nonprofit Farm Rescue (www.farmrescue.org), pinch-hits for farmers when illness or injury keeps them from their fields, often planting through the night to beat the summer heat or harvesting around the clock before the autumn frost sets in. Since 2006 he and his 50 volunteers and two staffers have helped some 60 farmers in the Dakotas and Minnesota. It's no surprise he's busy: Farming is one of the country's

“

Bill has such a generous heart for helping people”

—DONNA HENDERSON



A FAMILY IN NEED

“We had moments of panic after Paul’s accident,” says Donna Henderson of her husband (at right, with Donna, baby Ariel and son Ted). “Bill’s help has been such a blessing.”

most dangerous occupations, with 715 deaths and 80,000 disabling injuries last year. And a single missed harvest or planting can spell economic ruin. “If a family loses their farm, it’s their livelihood, their identity,” says Gross, a plainspoken bachelor. “We do as much as we can to help.” Says Carol Peterson of the Resource Conservation and Development program: “Bill’s amazing. Just looking at him makes me tired.”

The son of a third-generation farmer, Gross grew up on a 4,000-acre spread in Cleveland, N.Dak., driving tractors and combines from age 10. His dad, John, had suffered minor injuries over the years and would sometimes talk about a hired hand killed in a farming accident. “It instilled fear in me,” Gross recalls. Encouraged to go to college by his mom, Lorraine, Gross studied aviation at the University of North Dakota and landed a job with UPS in 1994. He also volunteered, working



AN EXTRA HAND

“What gets me out here is the camaraderie,” says volunteer Smokey Wright, 71 (fixing a tractor with Gross and Evan Henderson).

with orphans in Romania and helping rebuild homes in Croatia. Flying over the Pacific Ocean on a UPS run one night, he vowed to help folks back home: “I’m going to drive around with a big tractor,” he thought.

Friends laughed at his idea, but

Gross forged ahead, withdrawing \$10,000 in savings, soliciting donations and attracting volunteers like retired farmer Smokey Wright: “Years ago,” Wright, 71, says, “if you got sick, neighbors took care of you.” Now, with the demands of large-scale

LATE-NIGHT PLANTING

"What Bill is doing is a great example of charity," says Paul Henderson (right, with Gross and volunteer Charles Bartsch), checking the depth of canola seeds. "I'm so grateful to him."



“When we show up, you can see a cloud of worry lift” —BILL GROSS

farming, “people are scratching to get their own work done.”

That wasn’t an option for Shane Oakland, a 26-year-old farmer from Rock Lake, N.Dak., who had stomach-cancer surgery followed by chemotherapy this past spring. Gross and his crew planted 160 acres of his soybean crop. “Bill had this sense of desperation to get the job done,” Oakland says.

Gross brought that same urgency to the Henderson farm in Calvin, N.Dak. Just six months earlier Paul Henderson had scaled the ladder of a 20-ft.-high grain dryer when he tipped backwards and crashed to the ground, fracturing one of his vertebrae. He passed the winter in bed, fretting over how he’d get spring planting done; hiring workers would put him \$20,000 in debt. Then his brother, who’d read an

article about Gross in a John Deere dealership magazine, suggested Farm Rescue. On May 18 Gross showed up with five volunteers and one giant tractor. In nine days they planted nearly 1,000 acres of wheat, canola and sunflowers. At current prices, Henderson hopes to make enough to cover his operating costs and put food on the table for wife Donna, 45, and the kids: Adam, 13, Evan, 11, Ted, 6, Jake, 6, Elijah, 3, and Ariel, 11 months. Says Donna: “Bill has been a godsend.”

Gross, who hasn’t taken a vacation in three years and rarely spends time in his renovated brick home in Seattle, shrugs off praise. After getting hugs from the Henderson clan, he climbs into his pickup and drives off. “I feel grateful we helped them,” he says. “I feel we did the right thing.” ●



FARM LIFE

“The best thing about living on a farm is being outside,” says Evan Henderson, 11. “And I like the goats.”



Know a hero? Send suggestions to heroesamongus@peoplemag.com