

Gathering for the Gala

A Farm Rescue banquet brings together Farm Rescue volunteers and recipients.

By: **Mikkel Pates**, Agweek



From left: Bill Gross, chief executive and founder of Farm Rescue (left), media assistant Danielle Abbas, and by Farm Rescue Foundation recipients Nathan and Alissa Leier of Hague, N.D., draw door prizes at the group's annual banquet. Photo taken Nov. 1, 2013, in Bismarck. (Forum News Service/Agweek/Mikkel Pates)

BISMARCK, N.D. — The Farm Rescue annual banquet has become a summation and gathering point for volunteers and supporters, as well as recipients of the organization's help.

Farm Rescue is a nonprofit organization, based in Jamestown, N.D., that plants and harvests crops for farmers coping with injury, illness or a natural disaster, when the farmer's income is at risk. A separate organization — the Farm Rescue Foundation — helps families recovering from the aftermath of an injury, illness or natural disaster. The organization is funded by donations and grants.

At the organization's Nov. 1 banquet in Bismarck, Bill Gross, president and founder said that, despite weather challenges, the organization helped about 50 farmers this year in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, eastern Montana and even Iowa.

"It's been a very successful year of helping farm families," Gross said.

More than 200 families have been helped by the organization since its inception. Gross is a pilot for UPS, based in Seattle, but is a native of Cleveland, N.D., west of Jamestown. He handles much of the organization's affairs remotely, with a relatively small support staff.

The banquet is a button-down affair, with plenty of emotional impact, involving about 250 people.

Faron Wahl, the organization's regional operations manager, thanked volunteers, whom he called the skeleton structure of the organization. There was an appearance by country music professional Jason Brown, originally from the Pella, Iowa, area.

Christi Offutt, president and CEO of RDO Equipment, which donates the use of nearly \$3 million in John Deere equipment for the volunteers to plant and harvest the crops, attended her first banquet.

"It's a great honor to be here," Offutt said. "We're very proud to be the primary equipment provider."

RDO has supported the organization since its inception and RDO employees donate some support time during the farming seasons. Gross says RDO's support is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The most poignant moments in the program were from recipients themselves.

Giving it up

Nathan and Alissa Leier, a young brother and sister from a farm near Hague, N.D., in Emmons County, southeast of Strasburg, both were diagnosed with Friedreich's Ataxia, a neuromuscular disorder. Farm Rescue assisted the Leiers in 2008 and again in 2011. In the

past year, the Leiers applied for a grant from the foundation to acquire an Actiontec wheel chair for Nathan — a standing “chair” that allows him to get around the farm and out to the shop to help as best he can.

“I am not willing to give up on the things that I love just because I can’t get around on the farm,” Nathan said, adding the “feeling of being a farmer is the best in the world.”

Another testimony came from Kenton Hofer of Bridgewater, S.D., between Sioux Falls and Mitchell.

Hofer and his wife, Autumn, talked about their battle with his myelodysplastic syndrome since April 2013. MDS is a blood-related disorder, formerly called preleukemia. It requires a bone marrow transplant and heavy doses of chemotherapy. Several years ago, he read about Farm Rescue in a brochure at the Farm Service Agency office.

“This year, when I realized I was not going to get a crop in by myself, and didn’t want to depend on neighbors, my wife and I both concluded we needed to contact Farm Rescue,” Hofer says.

The Hofers, whose son was away in the military, helped coordinate the Farm Rescue volunteers as they planted corn at night.

“They literally went for two solid nights, all night long, planting,” Hofer said. “It started raining just after they finished. Without their help, I would not have harvested a tremendous crop this fall, which was such a blessing.”

But the greatest blessing of all is that, at Mayo Clinic, his marrow transplant was a success, his 10-year-old daughter completed fourth grade, and he was declared cancer-free in July.

“I’m thankful to God, to volunteers who stepped up to the plate,” Kenton said. “To experience that as a farmer is humbling and such a blessing.”

To top off the evening, the Hofers were the recipients of a drawing for a vacation trip for two to Anchorage, Alaska, including round-trip air fare, six nights in Marriott hotels and a scenic train to Prince William Sound.

In accepting the trip, Autumn noted she started her teaching career in Elim, Alaska, 100 miles east of Nome — one of the stops on the dog-sledding Iditarod Trail. One of their dreams as a couple is to go to Alaska. It’ll be a first for Kenton.



Kenton and Autumn Hofer of Bridgewater, S.D., speak about his recovery from a blood disorder called myelodysplastic syndrome, and about how Farm Rescue planted their corn crop in 2013. The couple also won a door prize trip to Alaska. (Forum News Service/Agweek/Mikkel Pates)