



**Front (left to right): Wes Gatlin, Ben Gardner, Caleb Bashore, Travis Hargrave; Middle: Keith Stigers, Jordyn Schaper, Corey Clevenger, Dillon Cooney, Trevor Schaper, Dakota Hoben, Helen Thompson, Max Bloomquist; Back: State fair board member Bob Schlutz and State Representative Tom Sands (Not pictured: Matt Wilson)**

PHOTOS: BOB ELBERT

# Tornado Heroes

This group of Iowa farm kids became unlikely heroes when tragedy struck their community. **BY CLAIRE VATH**

Iowa FFA state secretary Dakota Hoben had just plunged into the icy pond and returned to its surface when the lightning began. School was out for the summer and on this June 2007 day, Dakota and

They saw the inky black funnel pummel the small rural town, hit a house across the road and flatten the next. “After the tornado leveled the next house, it calmed pretty quickly,” says Dakota.

The sirens hadn’t even gone off, but the teens sprang into action. “Mrs. Thompson is an elderly woman who goes to my church,” explains Dakota. “We jumped in the truck to head to her house”—one of those hit by the storm.

It was eerily quiet as the teens made the short trip across the rural road, littered with tree limbs. Dakota’s friend Travis Hargrave was first on the scene; he climbed through a shattered window.

Once inside, Travis found Thompson lying on the floor. That’s when the others took action. Dakota was next to enter the house.

The 90-year-old was moaning and “lying on the floor covered in debris,” says Dakota. The boys put her in a chair, covered her wounds with towels, and got her out of the house.

Once safely outside, they rushed to the next house to look for survivors. Fortunately, the house’s occupants had vacated the premises.

The tornado wreaked havoc in a string of small Iowa communities. Dakota, who lives on his parents’ 1,000-acre row crop and cow/calf operation, says his family was lucky their farm wasn’t damaged. **“JUST IOWANS.”** Helen Thompson has since moved to a retirement community. She told a local paper she’s here “for the grace of God and these students.”

Shortly after the tornado, the paper ran a story on the farm kids titled “Heroes? Nope, Just Iowans.” Dakota is as humble as that headline suggests. “It’s tough,” he says. “I hope anyone in that situation would have responded the same way. We were just being good neighbors.”

News of their lifesaving mission quickly spread, and Dakota and his eight friends involved were honored by the Iowa Firemen’s Association. It’s a distinction that goes to firefighters—not farm kids. “We were surprised and honored to get the award,” says Dakota.

On Aug. 8, the teens received the Governor’s Lifesaving Award at the Iowa State Fair. “They had to kick in the door,” says Col. Patrick Hoyer, chief of the Iowa State Patrol who helps decide to whom the awards are given. “Instead of these kids worrying about themselves, they took to worrying about their community.”

These days, Dakota is in his first year at Iowa State University with a focus in ag business and political science. He plans to use his degree and farming background to promote the ag businesses in his state through leadership and public service. Judging by his and his peers’ rescue mission, he already has the public service part down pat. ●



**Iowa FFA state secretary Dakota Hoben and his friends received the Governor’s Lifesaving Award at the state fair.**

several of his classmates had gathered at a friend’s swimming hole just outside Grandview, Iowa. When the storm hit, the teens went inside to wait it out.

**CALL TO ACTION.** Suddenly, the wind picked up. Branches began snapping. The teenagers moved to the basement, but then “being teenagers, we went back upstairs to watch,” says the now-18-year-old Dakota.