

Safety Watch: Farm couple honored for safety work after experiencing tragedy

By Brandi Janssen
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Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health Director Brandi Janssen (right) presents Roger and Sally Stutsman with the 2017 I-CASH Hall of Fame Award.

Photo courtesy Brandi Janssen

Every year at the Midwest Rural Agricultural Safety and Health Conference, the I-CASH Hall of Fame award is presented to an individual or organization in Iowa who has made substantial or long-term contributions to the health and safety of Iowa's agricultural community.

Past Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health awards have gone to safety and health professionals, health care providers and Extension specialists.

This year, the award recognized Roger and Sally Stutsman, a farm couple who experienced a tremendous loss, but turned that into tireless energy to keep farmers safe.

Roger and Sally farm in Hills, Iowa, and have been married for 48 years. Roger is also a partner in Eldon Stutsman, Inc., his family's farm service, supply and equipment company in Hills.

Sally served five terms on the Johnson County Board of Supervisors and was later elected to the Iowa

House of Representatives, serving two terms. She was known for being willing to tackle difficult issues and find solutions, particularly for rural farm families.

Roger has been working in production agriculture all his life; he grew up on a diversified dairy farm. That farm expanded to an extended family operation where Roger worked with his father, brothers and sisters, and cousins. The farm today has multiple enterprises, including row crops, cow-calf production and a beef feeding operation.

Roger and Sally's only child, Michael, grew up on the farm. Mike moved away to attend college and then worked for the state of Washington's Conservation Corps in fish and wildlife conservation.

In the mid 2000s, Mike moved back to the Hills area to join the family farming operation. He and his wife, Jessica, started a local food production farm called Dirty Face Creek Farm and had a daughter, Sophie. Mike also helped with the family commodity operation.

In late November of 2008, Mike was killed in a harvesting injury event. Mike's death occurred while he was repairing a piece of equipment in the field.

This type of incident remains all too common in Iowa, where agriculture is responsible for more occupational fatalities than any other industry in most years. Tractor-related incidents and contact with equipment, including crushing injuries such as Mike's, cause the most fatalities.

Kelley Donham, a high school friend of Roger's and one of those who nominated Roger and Sally for the award, noted "in too many instances like this, the grieving of surviving relatives can be over-bearing. But Roger decided that he was going to do what he could to make sure no other family experienced this kind of tragedy."

After Mike's death, Roger co-founded the Rural Health and Safety Clinic of Eastern Iowa (RHC) with Donham and other neighbors from the Hills and Sharon Center area.

Roger has served as president of the organization and has given talks to various groups on the subject of farm safety. He assembled a board to guide the RHC, oversees the hiring of staff and has raised funds to support its activities.

The RHC's mobile unit provides educational demonstrations, clinical wellness screenings, as well as CPR, ATV safety and hearing loss prevention trainings. The clinic has become a well-known part of area farm safety day camps and eastern Iowa fairs each summer.

Roger has been a member of the National Certified Safe Farm Coalition and serves on the advisory board of I-CASH. He is an active member of the International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health.

Kevin Blind, the development and communications director of the RHC, said, “I find it admirable that he was able to turn a tragic event — the loss of his only son to a farm accident — to a driving force in his life.”

Upon accepting the award, Roger spoke of the gratitude he and Sally have for those who work for the health and safety of farmers and their families.

He noted the ongoing challenge of reducing the number of farm-related injuries and fatalities and how a farm-related death affects a family for many years.

“Mike died in November, so this is always a hard month,” he said.

Donham stated, “Roger and Sally’s commitment and energy to the mission of farm safety has been infectious and effective. There have been few active farm families to receive the I-CASH Hall of Fame award; the Stutsmans are duly qualified to receive it.”

For more information about the I-CASH Hall of Fame Award, and to view previous recipients, go to www.i-cash.org

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