

NEWS MINNESOTA

'It's bittersweet': Neighbors harvest beet fields for Minnesota farmer battling ALS

On Wednesday, Sept. 24, Polk County farmers helped Mark Holy, recently diagnosed with ALS, by harvesting over 400 acres of sugar beets for his family.



More than 100 farmers and drivers showed up to help harvest sugar beets from the Mark Holy fields in Keystone Township of Polk County on Wednesday, Sept. 24, 2025. Holy was diagnosed with ALS in July. Abby Makay / WDAY News



By **Kevin Wallevand**

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POLK COUNTY, Minn. — Shortly after sunrise on Wednesday, Sept. 24, trucks and tractors rolled up.

More than 100 farmers and drivers from all across Polk County, pausing their own harvest to help one of their own who received a diagnosis this summer of ALS, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

The morning sun struggled to break through the fog. But not long after sunrise, you could see sugar beet lifters tractors and truck drivers come through the mist.

They all came for their popular friend and farmer Mark Holy. A giant of a man in size, personality and heart.

"He is very strong, what he believes in; he believes and he stands by it. I am very proud of him," said Charlene Holy, Mark's wife.

On Wednesday, he and his family watched as fellow farmers made quick work of more than 400 acres of beets.

"It is bittersweet. I wish I could do it but God has a plan," Mark said, standing with help from his sons.

It was just July that Mark was diagnosed with ALS and it has progressed quickly. Time is short, and while it has robbed so much, the disease hasn't taken away Mark's grateful spirit.

"I just want to say thank you to everyone who is helping us at a time when we are hurting," Mark said.

Son Ryan will be taking over the farm; he was out lifting beets. So were the other boys, Grant and Austin.

"Looks good, nice crop," Ryan said from the tractor.

He watched longtime neighbors show up for his family asking for nothing in return except a little lunch brought to their truck.

"It's a great place. Great neighbors, great families and great people," Ryan said.

"It means everything. You don't want a horrible disease like this (ALS) but when people step up like this, we are just amazed. We are so thankful. This is love in action," Charlene said.

The thing is, so many farmers offered to help. They had to cut off the trucks at 95.

"They are all harvesting themselves and so for them to take a day out of their busy schedule to come and help us, it means the world to us, it really does," said Pam Holy, Ryan's wife.

"I thought everyone was going to be out digging beans but the farmers all said 'We will be there,' and they all pitched in, it was really nice," said Todd Cymbaluk, American Crystal Sugar agriculturist.

Ryan says friends will harvest nearly all of the sugar beet crop but not all. A few acres will sit for a couple of weeks before the family harvests it --- this as the family marks their journey into their father's own season of autumn.

"It is why we are leaving some beets so we can do it one last time together. Hopefully he can be in the field, one more time," Ryan said.

By the time the harvest was going full speed, the fog started to lift, revealing a field of abundance. Neighbors proving what it means to give and live.

"It is unbelievable," Ryan said.



By Kevin Wallevand

Kevin Wallevand has been a reporter at WDAY-TV since 1983. He is a native of Vining, Minnesota in Otter Tail County. His series and documentary work have brought him to Africa, Vietnam, Haiti, Kosovo, South America, Mongolia, Juarez, Mexico and the Middle East. He is an multiple Emmy and national Edward R. Murrow award recipient.

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