David Grove didn’t carry himself as a hero. He had a radiating sense of humor and a wholesome charm, an easy-going manner. But when the bullets flew on Nov. 11, 2010, during his attempted apprehension of two deer poachers, his mettle left no doubt who he was and for what he stood.

David’s life would end that horrible night 10 years ago along Schriver Road in Freedom Township, Adams County, mere miles from where he and his family went to watch deer on the Gettysburg battlefield during his younger years. But David lives on in the memories of his family and friends. They remember his strong moral compass, his assuredness, his love of the outdoors, his resolve to become a game warden. He lived to make a difference, and he surely did.

David’s father, Dana, believes his son’s interest in conservation stems from his family’s strong ties to fishing and hunting. It’s also where he believes David’s interest in becoming a conservation officer surfaced.

He reminisced about a defining day afield bowhunting with David when they encountered lawbreakers.

“We were coming out and some hoofies were out driving deer and one of them shot a deer with a gun in archery season,” Dana recalled. “I remember David got so disgusted and, to me, that’s the first spark I noticed in him to want to make a difference so that didn’t happen anymore. “All of my kids were taught that anyone can go out and outlaw – anybody. But it takes a real sportsman to do it the correct way.”

David was fascinated by nature and, as a youth, he explored the wilder areas of the Cumberland Valley that cradled his Waynesboro area home. As soon as he was old enough, he was out fishing, then hunting with his dad and older brother, Chad. Later, he would share the woods with his younger sister Jennifer. David loved nature’s secret places and open
spaces, and if family or friends accompanied him, their participation always heightened his experience.

“He loved to be around people,” noted David’s mom, Lucy. “If there was a room of people with nothing going on, and David walked into it, I guarantee you within several minutes he’d have something going on. He’d have people stirred up, he would be cracking jokes, whatever.”

David absolutely preferred to do things his way. His fondness for family and friends, and penchant for playfulness and joking sometimes meant his grades in school weren’t what his parents hoped for, and they sometimes wondered what David would do for a living later in life.

Surely, he couldn’t work behind an office desk; he wasn’t natured that way.

After graduating high school in 1997, David went to Appalachian Bible College in Bradley, W.Va., undecided on a major, but interested in a girl enrolled there, Dana said. In his second year, the girl had moved on, and David lost interest in being at school, but finished the year.

Dana remembered asking David, “What are you going to do with yourself now?”

Out of the blue, at least to Dana, David told his father he wanted to be a game warden.

“At that point, I think we all can attest to this, he never looked back,” Dana said assuredly.

DAVID ENROLLED at the Penn State Mont Alto campus in 2000, pursuing a wildlife sciences degree. When he learned that Franklin County Game Warden Kevin Mountz – his home county game warden – was coming to Mont Alto to present an introduction-to-wildlife lecture, David asked his professor to tell the warden he was interested in becoming a deputy. They met after the class.

“Generally, you can tell if people are interested in becoming a deputy when you talk to them,” Mountz noted. “Dave was very genuine; he was definitely interested.”

Soon Mountz was visiting the Grove home to meet with David and his family. David’s commitment to join “The Thin Green Line,” a phrase often used by wardens to describe their limited ranks and tireless efforts to protect wildlife, was unwavering. He needed some ride-alongs with Mountz and a week of training at Ross Leffler School of Conservation (RLSC) to become a full-fledged deputy.

But trouble interrupted David’s deputy plans while working a summer job at a local warehouse. He was hauling goods on a pallet jack when its tire slid in a puddle, and David’s left heel got crushed between the jack and a concrete post.

“It got to the point where he almost lost his foot,” Dana said.

Dana still can remember his orthopedic doctor asking David what he wanted to do for a profession. David said he wanted to be a game warden. The doctor told him to pick another profession.

“You might as well have closed David’s ears up, because he didn’t listen to the doctor,” Dana noted.

Bones in David’s foot were fused and would limit his range of movement, Lucy said. Healing and rehabbing the foot would take a long time.

But this potentially life-changing impairment wasn’t going to stop David’s quest to become a warden. He set his sights on and soon found himself at the RLSC, taking deputy training on crutches and in a walking boot.

As prepared as David was mentally, he had some challenges meeting the training’s physical standards. Jennifer talked about his improbable ascension of a 6-foot wall while wearing his awkward walking boot. Even with the help of a chair instructors provided, it was a battle for David to clear the wall. But he did.

David would graduate from his deputy training, crutches and all. And when he returned home, his family quickly saw how much it meant to him.

“I can still remember when he actually became a full-blown deputy,” Dana recalled with a smile. “It was a few hours before he was going out patrolling that night; he put on his uniform, and just walked around the house in it.”
“That was just David,” Jennifer added. “He was very excited about what he was doing. It’s just the sense of pride that comes with working for this outfit. It really is; I’m sure he was feeling some of that, it was his first step into the agency.” Dana said his son’s enthusiasm for the job was evident one night when he rode along with David and Mountz while they patrolled in Franklin County. A call came in about a deer poacher, miles away, and they hurried to the scene. “Kevin said let’s call in the State Police helicopter to try and look for this guy,” Dana recalled. “I still remember, Kevin got out and David turned around and said to me, ‘Dad, ain’t this great?’”

After two years at Mont Alto, David went to main campus and even secured a job at Penn State’s deer-research pens. It was like a dream come true.

A short time later, David would meet Centre County Game Warden Kris Krebs, who had staked out David’s pickup parked on the Toftrees tract of State Game Lands 176, not far from campus.

Eventually a young man appeared, carrying a shotgun, grinning ear to ear, Krebs recalled. “He acted as though he had just met a celebrity,” Krebs said. “In fact, he told me that he had been hoping to meet me. This was not the way that hunters typically received me.”

Whether rocking out to Guitar Hero, wetting a line or practicing his golf swing, David always did things his own way, which usually meant having fun.

After checking David’s license and equipment, Krebs learned that David was a deputy game warden in Franklin County who was hoping to work with Krebs while at Penn State, an opportunity that soon developed. “Dave and I became fast friends and that friendship continued throughout the remainder of his life; we shared many adventures,” Krebs said. “He was the kind of friend that only comes along once in a lifetime.”

AFTER FINISHING UP at main campus in 2004, David set his eyes on joining RLSC’s 27th game warden cadet class. He had a college education and had served as a deputy for seven years, yet, there was uncertainty about whether he’d be accepted. There were over 900 applicants, Dana said.

Mountz and Krebs prepared David for a letdown, telling him he probably wouldn’t get into the class because it’s highly competitive and a lot of applicants were getting military preference points, Jennifer recalled. “And the fact that he did get in showed he had the qualifications,” Jennifer noted proudly.

David worked hard as a RLSC cadet and his wildlife-sciences background helped a lot. But he succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations, becoming one of the top graduates in his class, through sheer determination. David would not accept failure. He still was the David everyone knew, but now he also was becoming a game warden.

Sullivan County Game Warden Rick Finnegan, a fellow 27th class cadet, recalled David’s love of warden work. “I remember asking him many times why he liked being a deputy and he’d always say, ‘It’s addicting, Finnegan; wait until you get out on night patrol, or field training’,” Finnegan said.

David always found the positive in everything, noted Finnegan and Game Commission Bureau of Wildlife Protection Director Jason DeCoskey. “Especially in golf,” Jason said. “We both needed lessons and would share tips on how to improve our game – they never worked!”

David’s positive attitude was reflected in his demeanor; even the fact he never swore, Finnegan recalled fondly. “Son of a rip,” Finnegan remembered David saying.

Following 49 weeks of training, David graduated with 21 other cadets in March 2008 and was assigned to Adams County. It was a role he seemed destined to fill, Krebs said.

The teenager who once pranced around playing Guitar Hero matured into a first-class game warden. It was a product of his
ambition to succeed, to be the best.

“He was highly competitive, but in a
good way,” Mountz recalled.

“Dave had an overriding sense of
enthusiasm about life and work,” Krebs
said. “He was a true leader – day in and
day out – and inspired those around him
to be better. And that enthusiasm was
to contagious. He just had a way of making
things more exciting and always made
me feel a little bit better about the work
I was doing.”

David’s positive attitude and com-
passion also had a profound effect on
the people who knew him as a wildlife
guardian. He was always fair and firm,
Dana said. He wanted to make a differ-
cence in his area.

“One of the things I always heard about
David was that when he cited guys, he
made them feel like they actually were
thankful they got a citation from him,
because he would not play the bad cop,”
Dana said. “He would say, this is what
you did wrong and then add, ‘Oh, by the
way, do you want me to help you drag this
deer out?’ And he would do that. He was
trying to make a difference, and he did.”

David had his authoritative side, too.
Dana remembered his son citing four men
hunting in a safety zone on a neighbor’s
property.

“I saw him pull in over there, and the
David I saw that day hammering those
four guys, was not the happy-go-lucky
David we knew,” Dana recalled. “He was
by-the-book serious. He was courteous,
but he had a job to do, and he did.”

Over the past 10 years, Dana said
his family has gotten to know a lot of
wardens as people. He said a warden once
told them that usually people only get to
see the officer part of a warden, they don’t
get to know the “person side.”

But with David, personality always
came shining through. And it had a way of
defusing awkwardness and anxiousness,
of keeping the peace.

David loved to talk about his cases with
his family and fellow wardens.

“Whenver he had a case, I would
guarantee within less than a half a day,
he’d call me or Jennifer or Mom and tell
us about it,” Dana said.

He’d explain all the steps in the case
and even do the voices of violators,
Dana recalled. He just loved telling those
stories.

Krebs got similar calls.

“David loved to share a good story,”
Krebs said. “He could make me feel as
if I was right there with him. Even when
he listened to my stories, he would hang
on every word and inject extra excitement
into the story.”

Krebs last talked with David by tele-
phone the night of the firefight that would
take David’s life.

“I could still hear the same excitement
that he displayed when we met in that
parking lot years earlier,” Krebs recalled.
The risks that David might face as
a warden were made clear to him long
before he would become the third Penn-
sylvania game warden to die by gunshot in
the line of duty. Dana remembers that talk.

“When Kevin Mountz first came to
our house, he said being an officer is not
a simple office job, you’re going to be
out there and things could happen,” Dana
recalled. “And we, as parents, said we’re
100 percent behind him. David wanted to
do it, and, honestly, today, even as we’re
sitting here, I can tell you that I’m glad he
did it. I’m glad because it was his desire.”

At 10:38 P.M. on Nov. 11, 2010,
31-year-old David Grove, proudly
serving to protect Pennsylvania’s wildlife,
saying ‘Hey, I’ll autograph a copy for you, because I’m going to be a celebrity,’” Jen-
nifer recalled. “And we laughed and said, ‘What do you mean you’re going to be a
celebrity?’ and were giving him all kinds of
grief about it.

“And I still remember, the day of the
funeral, we were all in this limo, having to
drive over to the services at the Waynes-
boro Senior High School, because there
were over 2,000 people. And I looked, and
and I said, and we all agreed, “David, you’re
a celebrity now.”

Krebs spoke at the service about how
David had called him hours before the
firefight that would take his life.

Krebs and Lycoming County Game
Warden Jon Wyant, both field training
RLSC cadets, were at Denny’s, waiting
for food they had ordered. And after learn-
ing Krebs’ whereabouts, David, always
the jokester, told him, “You know, the real
game wardens aren’t sitting in a booth at
Denny’s tonight, Buddy!”

David always called Krebs “Buddy.”

And that night he was giving it back to
Krebs, who always teased him that the
“real game wardens” were in the north-
central mountains.

When their food arrived, Krebs had to
cut the call short, promising to call David
back later.

“But I never got the chance to talk to
him again,” Krebs said.

SINCE DAVID’S DEATH, the Groves’
connection with conservation law
enforcement has remained strong. The
family repeatedly has spoken and lis-
tened to wardens from across the nation,
recently, at the North American Wildlife
Conservation Officers Association con-
ference.

“We shared our hearts, about how this
has impacted us, to help them see what it’s
like for a family and all the emotions and
the things we had to go through; it’s not
something you ever want to go through,”
Dana explained.

Time and the tight-knit family’s strong
Christian faith have helped the Groves
cope. Ten years later, it’s easier to talk
about what they’ve been through, what
they’ve lost, Dana acknowledged. But
some memories still are hard to revisit.

“One of the things that David always
did, and I’ll always miss, was, he’d walk
in the door and come over, and instead
of giving me a kiss, he would lick my
cheek,” Lucy tearfully reminisced, col-
lecting herself from the emotions the
memory stirred. “I mean, that was just
David. And that’s one thing that I’ll never
have again.”

Words also cannot describe what
a father feels when he learns just how
much his son thought of him, only hours
after he’s lost him. Dana went through
that when B.J. Small, then-editor of the
Gettysburg Times, shared one of David’s
answers on a questionnaire he’d filled
out for the newspaper the day before he
was killed.

The questionnaire had asked David to
name his hero. He wrote “Dad.”

And suddenly, in the chaos that
besieged the Grove family that horrific
day, a little bit of David returned to them.

“To me, it spoke volumes; he wanted
people to know,” Dana tearfully recalled.

David is unquestionably Dana’s hero,
too, as he always will be for the rest of
his family, countless wardens across
North America and Pennsylvanians who
remember his bravery defending wildlife.

In conservation circles, David’s stand
against evil will reverberate for decades
to come. He stood tall defending The
Thin Green Line and now rests in peace.
God bless.