

R E M E M B E R I N G

# DAVID GROVE

**W**ILDLIFE CONSERVATION Officer 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 inter-

est 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 hoof-ties 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



## FAIR, FUN-LOVING AND FOREVER A CONSERVATION HERO

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.

**D**AVID 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 pick another profession.

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

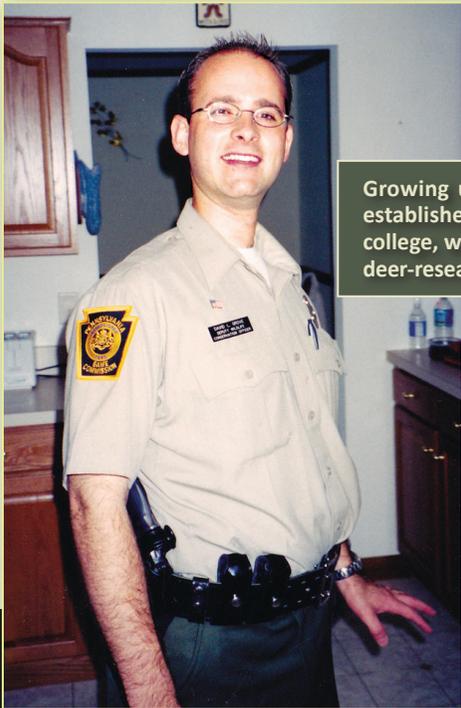
Bones in David’s foot were fused and would limit his range of movement, Lucy said. Healing and rehabbing the foot would take a long time.

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.”



Growing up hunting and fishing, David’s love of the outdoors was established at an early age. Starting work as a deputy while still in college, where he studied wildlife sciences and worked at Penn State’s deer-research pens, a career in conservation seemed a natural next step.



“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.”

**A**FTER 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 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 compassion 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 difference 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 it.”

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.

“Whenever 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 telephone the night of the fire 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 Pennsylvania 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,

pulled over the pickup from which a deer had just been illegally shot by a convicted felon who was not to possess firearms. The poacher, now sitting on death row, convicted of first-degree murder in Grove’s slaying, drew a .45-caliber handgun on the officer, setting off a firefight in which Grove was struck four times.

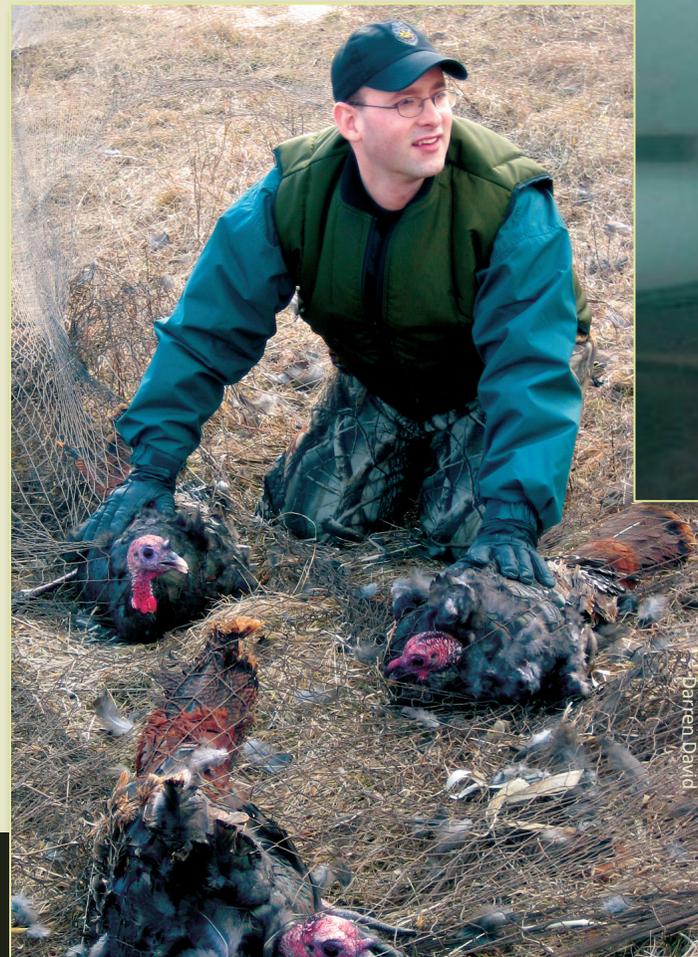
The outpouring of support for the Grove family, not only from Pennsylvania, but worldwide, was immediate. Conservation officers and policemen from across North America converged on Waynesboro for David’s funeral.

It had been only a few weeks earlier that a deer-poaching story David wrote for *Game News* titled “A Shot in the Dark” came out. David was proud of it and, as always, playfully so.

“He came in with the *Game News*,



B.J. Small/Getty Images



Barren David

Warden work was a dream job for David, and he usually carried it out with a smile on his face, unbridled enthusiasm and a calm demeanor that defused awkwardness and anxiousness, and helped to keep the peace.

saying ‘Hey, I’ll autograph a copy for you, because I’m going to be a celebrity,’” Jennifer 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 Waynesboro Senior High School, because there were over 2,000 people. And I looked, 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 fire 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 learning 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.

**S**INCE DAVID’S DEATH, the Groves’ connection with conservation law enforcement has remained strong. The family repeatedly has spoken and listened to wardens from across the nation, recently, at the North American Wildlife Conservation Officers Association conference.

“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, collecting 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. ♣