



Help in the Heartland

Disabilities happen. The Missouri AgrAbility Project helps farmers stay productive.

STORY BY MARK BARNA * PHOTOS BY NICHOLAS BENNER

“Holly!” Jim Harig shouts. Moments later, miniature horses and donkeys appear from a distant hollow on a hay-colored pasture. Breaking into a gallop, the donkey named Holly, the group’s dominant animal, leads six other hoofed creatures to the feeding trough.

To arrive at this pasture, one of 13 on this miniature-animal farm in southern Missouri, Harig walked a quarter of a mile. He wobbles, shakes and sometimes falls during his feeding rounds. He doesn’t use an all-terrain vehicle because he can’t grip the levers.

Harig, 67, suffers from idiopathic peripheral neuropathy, a degenerative nerve condition that severely compromises his balance and froze his fingers into claws. Because his vocal cords are partially paralyzed, he inhales when making his animal call, making it sound plaintive as it echoes off the densely wooded hills in the Ozark backcountry east of Eminence.

“My vocal cords went out about 10 years ago,” says Harig, who is increasingly worried about his ability to operate the farm. “I’m just waiting to see what’s next.”

When farmers suffer from severe injury or chronic ailments, they don’t have a lot of choices. Farming is physically demanding, and the average age of American farmers is late 50s, as younger generations forgo the vocation. Injury or sickness for agriculture workers can mean early retirement, medical disability or a career change. The Missouri AgrAbility Project (MAP), administered by the University of Missouri, offers farmers another option.

MAP connects disabled agriculture workers with state agencies. The project coordinates di-

rect services — such as vocational rehabilitation, physical therapy and aid for sight impairment — to nearly 50 Missouri farmers each year. It helps hundreds of others through phone consultations.

In August 2012, Harig got help from PHARM, or Pets Helping Agriculture in Rural Missouri, an arm of MAP that matches disabled farmers with herd and service dogs. He received a service dog in hopes that it would steady him when making feeding rounds and also perform other tasks.

“The AgrAbility mission is to enhance and protect quality of life and preserve livelihoods,” says Karen Funkenbusch, co-director of MAP. “The AgrAbility philosophy represents the very ideals that define American agriculture. It’s about supporting and promoting growth and independence.”

Missouri Farmers Benefit

AgrAbility is funded in 22 states by the United States Department of Agriculture. MU got involved in 1995 when the program partnered with public land-grant universities. Missouri’s program, financed by a federal grant of \$180,000 a year, is overseen by MU Extension through the Division of Food Systems and Bioengineering.

MU Extension representatives visit disabled farmers to assess how they might benefit from medical treatment, modifications on the farm or both. An assessment might result in helping the farmer prepare an application for vocational rehabilitation services or connecting the worker with an outside agency that offers physical therapy or other services. “The AgrAbility program demonstrates the ability of extension services to respond to local needs and make a difference through collaborative partnerships,” Funkenbusch says.



† Larry D. Gieseker, 56, rides a chairlift to the cockpit of a combine on his farm near Mexico, Mo. Gieseker's son, Chris, operates the lift from the cockpit.

Jim Brinkmann, BS Ag '90, is a district supervisor for Rehabilitation Services for the Blind (RSB) in Jefferson City, Mo. At any one time, Brinkmann has roughly 20 agriculture-worker cases that have been referred to him by extension specialists. He travels 1,000 miles a month visiting visually impaired Missourians. Because Brinkmann himself is blind, an aide does the driving.

"A challenge to me and my staff is to be creative to come up with solutions for our clients," Brinkmann says.

AgrAbility referred Lee Howerton to RSB. Howerton operates a 1,400-acre cattle and sheep farm near Hurdland, Mo. His world is a visual fog. He is so nearsighted he can't drive an automobile. After giving him a low-vision driving test, RSB determined Howerton could handle an ATV to navigate his sprawling farm.

In 2010, Howerton, 49, received from RSB a government-funded Arctic Cat Prowler. The vehicle is slow enough for him to control on the uneven farm paths. He's put a lot of miles on it. The 2012 drought scorched most of Howerton's pastures by summer's end. He had to move the animals to two distant greener pastures, transport water to them and erect electric fences.

"Without the vehicle, it would limit what I can do," Howerton says. "I wouldn't be able to handle as many cattle and sheep."

But what works for one client might not be sufficient for another. Rick and Alda Owen live on a 260-acre cattle farm near Maysville, Mo. Alda, 60, is legally blind with limited depth perception. Through RSB, she received in July 2012 a Kubota utility vehicle and special eye glasses, among other items. But she still can't tell a cow from a bush on the pasture.

Enter Jo, a young border collie trained to round up cattle and sheep. RSB paid for the training of the collie, the third herd dog placed through MAP.

"AgrAbility has helped me realize that I can be productive," Owen says. "Even with my disability, I can continue to be involved on the farm."

Farmers who've suffered a traumatic injury also benefit. On May 24, 2008, Larry D. Gieseker was paralyzed from the waist down after slipping during a night crossing of an Audrain County bridge. He fell 30 feet onto dirt and rock and has been in a wheelchair ever since. But Gieseker, 56, and his 28-year-old son, Chris, still work their 1,600-acre corn and soybean farm near Mexico, Mo.

A few months after his accident, AgrAbility connected Gieseker with Rural Services for Vocational Rehabilitation in Nevada, Mo. An assessor concluded that Gieseker would benefit from chairlifts. Two were installed: one on a combine and one on a tilling tractor. Gieseker steers his powered wheelchair to a lift, swivels onto its seat with help from

← Previous spread:

Jim Harig, 67, finds it increasingly difficult to maintain his animal farm in the Ozarks due to a chronic degenerative nerve condition.



← Jim Harig pours feed for his miniature cows.

Chris and is spirited to the machine's cockpit. "It makes it to where I can do something," Giesecker says. "Without the lifts, I couldn't tend the fields."

A Farmer's Best Friend

The Shawnee Creek Alpacas farm in the Ozark Mountains has 72 miniature animals. The farm sells horses, donkeys, goats, cows and the coats of alpacas. Rolling hills of walnut, hickory and oak surround the 180 acres. At the farm's center is a spacious two-story white colonial, where Harig lives alone.

Other than a 17-year-old farm helper, Harig receives few visitors. But on Aug. 7, 2012, several vehicles kicked up a balloon of dust on his winding driveway. Harig was about to meet Dixon.

Dixon is a 3-year-old Labrador retriever given up as a puppy to a dog shelter. Such animals are many times euthanized, but Dixon got lucky. He was adopted and trained to be a service dog by Greater Dayton Lab Rescue in Ohio. Greater Dayton supplies service dogs to PHARM, overseen by Jackie Allenbrand, an AgrAbility outreach rural specialist in northwest Missouri. Dixon is the second service dog placed through the program. Though PHARM runs mostly on donations, which pay for service-dog training, Harig paid the \$5,000 cost. To date, the program has placed two service dogs and three herd dogs.

On an overcast and humid day, Greater Dayton

trainers helped Harig adjust to the animal. The biggest concern was whether Dixon would be accepted by Harig's four Great Pyrenees, huge dogs with burly coats who guard the miniatures from predators. But two weeks after Dixon's arrival, the Pyrenees and Labrador were getting along fine, as were man and dog. "He's the gentlest animal I've ever had," Harig says. "He's always with me. He sticks to me like glue."

Holding on to a leash or harness attached to Dixon, Harig steadies himself when walking the paths to the pastures to feed the miniatures. Dixon fetches tools for Harig and opens and closes gates. Without Dixon, Harig says, he would have to hire another worker, something he can't afford. "For someone like me who wants to remain independent," he says, "Dixon is great." **M**



← Harig uses Dixon, a service dog, to steady himself as he heads out for a morning feed.