

Physical challenges don't hold these farmers back

Issue Date: November 30, 2005

Christine Souza



Dan Bledsoe has not allowed his disability to prevent him from being a hog farmer.

Yolo County hog farmer Dan Bledsoe was born with spina bifida, a condition that has left him unable to walk without the help of crutches or a wheelchair. But that hasn't steered him away from a farming career, something he knew he wanted to do since his childhood days as a member of 4-H and Future Farmers of America.

To help make his dream of farming a reality, Bledsoe sought help from the California AgrAbility Project—a program that is a partnership between the University of California Cooperative Extension Farm Safety Program and Easter Seals Superior California. CalAgrAbility is federally funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Like many other farmers with physical disabilities, the program gave him hope.

"A friend of ours referred us to the program. CalAgrAbility helped me get some ideas about how to make the farm more handicapped-accessible and how to make my life easier so I can operate it better," Bledsoe

said.

Since it was formed in 2002, the California AgrAbility Project has helped more than 120 farmers and farmworkers throughout California. The program is intended to link farmers and agricultural workers who have disabilities with assistance services and to encourage farmers and farmworkers to continue working in agriculture. It does so by furnishing them with information and referrals for equipment modifications, job restructuring, health care, rehabilitation and stress management.

"It is a big step for disabled farmers and farmworkers to just ask for help," CalAgrAbility Project Manager Martha Stiles said. "And sometimes it is a family member who calls us. Once they finally get to the point where they realize that they really need to ask for help, they don't know what the next step is or where to go.

"Sometimes when we sit down with some of our farmers, it helps to tell stories of other folks in similar situations. It makes them feel not so alone and helps them realize that they don't have to stop farming," Stiles said.

Dan Bledsoe was able to start a small-scale hog farming business caring for 17 sows and about 100 pigs, with help from CalAgrAbility and his father, John Bledsoe. He and his father sell the meat at the farmers' market in Davis.

"Through the program, we e-mail ideas and work on grants and loans to make our farming conditions more suitable. I'm currently applying for two grants to help get equipment," Dan Bledsoe said. "If (other disabled people) want to go into business for themselves, I definitely recommend the program. "

An important part of the program, Stiles added, is the on-farm assessment during which CalAgrAbility personnel determine the type of help that a disabled grower needs by visiting his or her farm. In Bledsoe's case, Stiles said, mobility was crucial.

"The most immediate need was to help get him hand controls so he could drive himself and to find a trainer that would teach him how to drive," Stiles said. "We also hooked him up with a swine expert from UC Davis. The primary issue there was how to configure the business from pig breeding to the next step of processing."

The 22-year-old hog farmer says he got started in the business following time spent raising pigs while a member of FFA.

"It is kind of an FFA project that went a little wild," he said. "But I get along. My dad is basically the legs and I'm kind of the brains. I was raised around agriculture my whole life and it is what I want to do. It is the way I was raised. "

Bledsoe has overcome considerable obstacles, enabling him to operate a successful farming business. He has increased his mobility and he attends Woodland Community College, where he studies agriculture.

Ray Austin Jr., a Fresno farmer, was born with a misshapen left leg that was amputated when he was a young boy and a right foot that has only one bone. Austin has been farming raisins for the past 30 years and said he appreciates the help he received from CalAgrAbility.

"I have an artificial right leg and over the years it has been harder and harder for me to get around the ranch. Through the program I was able to get a John Deere Gator (utility vehicle) and they got me a new (prosthetic) leg," Austin said. "The new one is so much better. It is made of carbon graphite and is much lighter. It is the Rolls Royce."

Austin said he would not have been able to afford the utility vehicle and prosthesis without guidance provided by CalAgrAbility.

"I had been to Social Security and all of the other organizations and nothing (resulted). But Martha knows how to get things done," Austin said. "At the property she noticed right away that I needed that Gator because walking around here is really tough on me. I used to use my tractor to go out and check drip and other things, but I was climbing on and off that thing 50 times a day."

Austin sold his farming property a few months ago and is looking for more agricultural land to farm.

"I have several different ideas (about what to do next), but it will be some kind of farming. I sure don't want an office desk job," Austin said.

Gregg Daniels from San Bernardino County wasn't always a pig farmer. Since he loved working with children, he coached youth sports until the day he was stabbed by a relative of one of his students during a basketball game. The attack left him unable to stand or walk for extended periods, limiting his ability to work with pigs.

"You are in there working with large animals and it could be dangerous and this is one thing we advised him on. But he is just in love with pigs," Stiles said. "His goal was to try to get his farm set up safely and to get off disability payments and create a working farm."

Daniels, 40, overcame being a victim of such a violent crime and developed his pig business. With the help of CalAgrAbility, he was able to increase his mobility and stamina around the farm, and is now working with children again by teaching 4-H and FFA. He also created his own Web site.

Daniels said that even with assistance from CalAgrAbility, operating his farm has been very difficult.

"I have struggled with financing and government grants for some time and if I don't get more help soon I will have to close my farm," he said. "I have sacrificed everything in my life to keep my farm running."

"Many folks who come to us need money, but (CalAgrAbility) is a low-budget statewide program and we don't have funds to give," Stiles said. "For Gregg, we conducted research on loans and grants, and hooked him up with swine experts in California, provided information on Web marketing, structuring pig pens for safe use and other things. He was like a sponge. He just absorbed everything that we gave him as well as information that was provided by other folks that helped. "

To enroll or get additional information about CalAgrAbility, visit calagrability.ucdavis.edu on the Web; contact Martha Stiles at (530) 752-2606 or mcstiles@ucdavis.edu; or contact Mary Reyna of Easter Seals at (916) 679-3117 or marvr@easterseals-superiorca.org.

(Christine Souza is a reporter for Ag Alert. She may be contacted at csouza@c.fbf.com.)

Permission for use is granted, however, credit must be made to the California Farm Bureau Federation when reprinting this item.