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Able to stay on the job

Program helps Californians with disabilities perform the agricultural work they enjoy.

By Dennis Pollock / The Fresno Bee

Titanium and carbon graphite have taken the place of Ray S. Austin Jr.'s left leg, the one that was misshaped at birth and amputated when he was 4.

His right foot has only one bone. But Austin walks with a cane and hoists his body behind the wheel of a golf-cart-sized John Deere Gator he uses for farm work at his vineyard west of Fresno. The Gator is easier to climb into and out of than the much larger Case tractor it replaced.

Austin credits the University of California program CalAgrAbility with helping him to continue farming. The program, staffed by two people, has helped 65 Californians with disabilities -- growers, ranchers and farmworkers -- to stay on the job in the past three years.

More than 20,000 disabling injuries occur on California farms each year. Agriculture is one of the nation's three most hazardous occupations, often vying with mining and construction for the top ranking.

"I like farming, even though it can be a pain in the neck," Austin says. "It's what I want to do."

"[CalAgrAbility is] the only outfit I've seen that wants to keep you farming," Austin says. "They're not a bunch of bureaucrats. They get things done." San Bernardino County hog farmer Gregg Daniels agrees.

The program gave him help, Daniels says. "But most of all, they gave me hope."



Raisin-grape grower Ray S. Austin Jr. of Fresno has a new prosthetic leg, which he received through the efforts of CalAgrAbility. The program also helped Austin obtain the John Deere Gator, at right, which is easier to climb in and out of than the tractor it replaced. (Eric Paul Zamora/ The Fresno Bee)

In 1994, when Daniels was a youth football coach in Barstow, he was flagged down on Interstate 15 near Apple Valley after a game and attacked by an irate parent and uncle of one of his players. "I pulled the kid out in the fourth quarter," Daniels says. "My philosophy was that every kid played, no kid would ride the pine."

Daniels was stabbed and beaten. He lost 4 feet of his intestines and needed nine surgeries. Both of his attackers served time in prison.

Daniels also has curvature of the spine, unrelated to the attack, and he nurses injuries from when he played football. He weighed 380 pounds when he

contacted CalAgrAbility, and they helped him lose about 80 pounds.

"I thought I was out there alone," Daniels says. "I thought life was over. They set me up with people at UC Davis who knew about swine. They sent me a program for doing a Web site and got me plans for the pig farm."

The plans included aisles between pens so that Daniels could navigate more easily on his electric scooter.

"We advised him on safety issues, working with large animals," says Martha Stiles, project manager for CalAgrAbility. Boars in Daniels' pens can weigh up to 1,300 pounds.

Daniels was inspired by a grandfather who raised prize-winning swine in Indiana. Daniels' health had forced him out of a \$62,000-a-year job as an operating engineer in construction in 2000. He began his hog farm in 2001.

Now, the former coach sells swine that are show pigs and is again interacting with young people who are members of 4-H Clubs and FFA.

He credits Stiles with telling him "what I taught my kids in football: 'Don't quit now.'"

Stiles also helped Austin during his visits to the California Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, where he received a new prosthesis to replace one that was nearly 25 years old.

The department also supplied him with the all-terrain Gator that has a value of about \$6,000.

Stiles says the vocational rehabilitation specialist told her it was the first time she had worked with a farmer in her 30 years on the job.

"All my life, I've tried to get help through various disability organizations and I never got any assistance until I met Martha," Austin says. "Martha knows how to manipulate the bureaucracy. She knows how to keep her cool."

By contrast, Austin had grown frustrated. Twenty-five years ago, he says, he wanted to get a job driving bulldozers.

"But a doctor I never saw decided I couldn't do that," Austin says. "He suggested sending me to typewriter-repair school in Los Angeles."

Austin declined. He ultimately took a job driving a bulldozer and has been farming for 30 years, inspired by his late father, who taught agriculture at Central, Clovis and Clovis West high schools.

Mary Reyna, with Easter Seals Superior California in Sacramento and a case manager with CalAgrAbility, plays much the same role as advocate for what she and Stiles refer to as "consumers."

Reyna speaks Spanish and is able to assist farmworkers, who total about 70% of those CalAgrAbility helps. The others are farmers or ranchers who have small enterprises.

Nearly one-third of them are women.

About 70% of those who are helped suffered injuries on the job farming.

Among those Reyna has assisted is farmworker Sebastian Mendez, who was harvesting plums that would become prunes in Yolo County with a tree shaker when one of the trees toppled on him.

Unable to speak English, he was accompanied by Reyna to medical appointments, pharmacy consultations and meetings that dealt with benefits under workers' compensation insurance.

"I was his advocate," says Reyna, who also helped two other Mendez family members address health concerns that included diabetes. She also helped the family find child care. Mendez is now a beekeeper.

"Disabilities affect the whole family," Reyna said. "We have to work with everyone in the family."

She worked with another family to assist a teenage boy who was deaf and had not yet learned sign language. He was not attending school and was working in the fields.

Through California Children's Services, he was able to obtain hearing aids and now is attending school and learning sign language.

She also helped a farmworker couple, making it possible for the woman to return to the fields by finding support for 11 other family members and her injured husband.

The family was referred to in-home support services, medical professionals, physical therapists and a provider of medical equipment.

CalAgrAbility assistance usually starts with a site visit and farm assessment.

That accounts for the high mileage logged by Reyna and Stiles, who help farmers design and customize assistance plans that take into account the needs of the injured worker.

The program started in the 13-county Eastern Seals Superior California region around Sacramento, from Sutter County south to Tuolumne County. It has been expanded statewide.

CalAgrAbility's annual budget of \$150,000 comes from the federal government, which funds the program in 24 states. It started as part of the 1990 Farm Bill.

The program has "a tremendous database," Stiles says, that enables case workers to quickly find solutions by e-mailing other state project directors.

Because of its low funding, the program does not give financial aid. Instead, it seeks to make connections through which farmers, ranchers and workers can get help.

Help may be in the form of modifications in the workplace that help prevent further injury. It can mean adjusting the height of work surfaces, varying tasks throughout the day to cut down on repetitive strain injuries, and modifying tools to add padding or to lengthen handles.

"The mission of the whole project is to help ag people continue working," Stiles says. "That's been a huge problem for decades, maybe even centuries. Look at the farm land we're losing. If [farmers] can stay on the job with adaptive assistance or technology, the farm can be saved. This is what they know."

Stiles says there is more of a buzz about the program among farmworkers. "They have a good internal program, good word of mouth," she says. "It's harder to reach the farmers, who are on a couple acres or 40 acres and who are uninsured or underinsured.

"The larger corporate farms don't need us, but those who don't have a lot of resources can be helped," she says.

Stiles and Reyna visit farm shows and make presentations at conferences to inform disabled workers of their services. In a recent visit to Fresno, Stiles met with Kimberly Naffziger, program development specialist who spends much of her time working on farm-safety issues with the Center for Agricultural Business at California State University, Fresno.

Stiles brought a bag of tools that had been modified to make them easier to use, including rakes, pliers and hammers.

Naffziger appeared most impressed with pictures that showed use of switch-activated steps added to tractors to make it easier to get on or off the vehicles.

"The steps, I love the steps," she says.

Naffziger says she would like to see employers use some of the adaptations to keep older workers on the job, a special challenge given the aging of the farm work force.

"I'd like to see these introduced to companies with the message, 'You don't have to retire people out; you can retain these people,'" Naffziger says.

Farmers are an inventive lot, so it's not surprising that some who have disabilities have come up with their own innovations to keep farming.

A Redding farmer who uses a wheelchair designed raised beds for growing crops. Other farmers have come up with hoists and platform lifts they use to climb aboard tractors and other machinery. To avoid twisting in his tractor seat to look behind him, one farmer put a swivel seat in place.

Another who is a quadriplegic and has limited use of his hands modified the steering mechanism of his tractor to duplicate that of his wheelchair.

Austin says he was impressed when he attended a national convention of AgrAbility agencies in Nebraska in 2003.

"I met people in wheelchairs screwed up worse than I am, and they keep farming," he says.

Austin, a grower of raisin grapes who shares patents on harvesting equipment with partner Dave Walker, is selling his vineyard because of encroaching housing development.

But he has no plans to cease farming.

And it's a sure bet he'll be using the John Deere Gator on his next farming endeavor.

"I wish I'd had that 30 years ago," he says.

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Martha Stiles, project manager for CalAgrAbility, shows a breakdown of injuries the program addresses through a slide-show presentation in Fresno in March. (Eric Paul Zamora / The Fresno Bee)



Tools can be modified for people with disabilities. Agriculture is one of the nation's three most hazardous occupations, with more than 20,000 disabling injuries occurring on California farms yearly. (Eric Paul Zamora / The Fresno Bee)

Information on CalAgrAbility is available at <http://calagrability.ucdavis.edu/> or by contacting Martha Stiles at (530) 752-2606 or mcstiles@ucdavis.edu, or Mary Reyna at (916) 679-3117 or maryr@easterseals-superiorca.org.