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Indiana Farmer Thrives Despite Paralyzing Injury

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

Some innovative equipment modifications make it possible for Ed Bell to continue farming despite the fact he has been paralyzed from the collarbone down since 1982 after being shot in a violent crime. Just 21 years old at the time, Bell was a hog producer. With only limited use of his arms and hands, he was depressed about his future.

"A pivotal moment came when my dad — a World War II and Korean vet — scolded me and said 'You need to pull your own weight,'" Bell recalled.

When Bell moaned that he was paralyzed, his dad replied that he still needed to "pull what weight you can".

Back home on the farm, it was apparent that working in the hog operation would be difficult. But he could get on a tractor to mow and do other chores, so the Bells started modifying equipment.

Many of their ideas look like they could come right out of the pages of FARM SHOW. An old corncrib - with the walls removed - serves as a ramp for his wheelchair, helping him slip into the seat of his Allis-Chalmers tractor. His toolbox holds oversize wrenches with cheater bars to give him extra power that his arms can't provide. A mark on a tractor tire allows him to count the rotations to accurately measure and divide plots for his strawberry beds. The clever hand controls he designed allow him to operate gas and brake pedals.

"Once we realized I was actually contributing, my brain kicked in full throttle, and we started looking for jobs I could do," Bell explains.

In 1987, he and his wife bought the family farm and started their current operation that includes growing and selling strawberries, asparagus and Doberman puppies. Bell does field work, manages inventory and employees' scheduling, and handles marketing, including creating the farm's website (www.eatmorestrawberries.com).

Bell resisted outside help at first, but eventually he contacted AgrAbility after reading a brochure his mother-in-law had picked up. AgrAbility got its start in 1979 at Purdue University and now has organizations in 25 states that work with farmers and ranchers who have a wide range of disabilities.

"Sometimes the male ego is the biggest disability," he notes. "AgrAbility introduced me to other farmers like myself. I was humbled and knew there was a lot to learn. It really helped launch my future."

One of his favorite pieces of equipment is a lift made by Life Essentials ([\[lifeessentialsweb.com\]\(http://lifeessentialsweb.com\)\) that is on one of his new tractors. The homebuilt lifts he designed still work, he notes, but aren't as convenient now that he is older.](http://www.</p>
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"This new lift swings, articulates two ways, and goes up and down," Bell says. Besides getting on the tractor (or equipment parked next to it), he uses it to refuel his tractor and even change the floodlight on his porch.

He has also learned about many other little things that make life easier, such as Cool Bandanas (www.coolbandanas.com) which contain polymers that when soaked with water help keep him cool on hot summer days. He uses a machete instead of a weed eater to cut weeds. He ties ropes to hitch pins so he can easily unhook equipment from the tractor seat. All of his tractors have canopies and protective equipment, including seatbelts and rollbars.

Learning techniques to make jobs easier is as important as modifying equipment, Bell notes. He always keeps a toolbox handy with everything from tools to earplugs to extra hitch pins to peppermint candy. Another disabled farmer told him how to take care of his bathroom needs without assistance.

"Now I travel across the country by myself. You can't buy that kind of freedom," Bell says.

As a consultant for AgrAbility, he travels to different states to conduct farmer workshops. He's available to talk to individuals as well.

He also does consulting work with The Standing Company (www.the-standing-company.com), the only U.S. company that makes a manually-operated standing wheelchair. The ability to be in a standing position helps resolve many health issues faced by people confined to wheelchairs, Bell says.

The Bell family was named 2006 Indiana Farm Family of the Year. Ed Bell is also a motivational speaker. Along with his faith in a higher being, he credits AgrAbility and the farmers he's met through it for his success.

"There is no reason to reinvent the wheel," he emphasizes, as both a client and spokesperson for AgrAbility. "Instead of being stubborn and trying to figure out everything on your own, contact AgrAbility to find out what other farmers have already learned."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Ed Bell, 16447 State Road 38, Hagerstown, Ind. 47346 (ph 765 489-5753; www.eatmorestrawberries.com).



The AgrAbility program works with injured or ill farmers, as well as farmers who are slowed down by age and conditions like arthritis.

Where To Go When Accident Or Illness Strikes

AgrAbility has been working with injured or ill farmers for more than 30 years, since ag engineering professor Bill Field at Purdue University started the Breaking New Ground Resource Center in 1979. That center later served as the model for the USDA AgrAbility Program, established by the 1990 Farm Bill, and which now has state organizations across the country.

"In the past we worked mostly with farmers injured by some traumatic event. But increasingly we are working with farmers who are slowed down by age and conditions like arthritis," says Field.

The organization gets many of its ideas from the people being served and in publications such as FARM SHOW. They make the ideas available to farmers and ranchers who come to them looking for help.

Ideas are as varied as farming itself: A track system was created so dairy farmers with bad hips or knees can sit while milking in a Herringbone parlor. Pedal extenders and hydraulic actuators on equipment enable farmers under 4 ft. tall to farm. A Vietnam veteran who lost both legs was able to do custom baling with hand-controlled, modified equipment.

"I know a Michigan blueberry grower with incredible disabilities who raises great blueberries," Field says. "Watching him is as moving as any religious experience I can describe. Slowly, patiently, he does the needed trimming. It just takes longer... I once went home with 38 lbs. of blueberries," says Field.

The Breaking New Ground Resource

Center has produced more than 50 publications that are free to farmers, which address very specific conditions: limited visibility, cerebral palsy, and arthritis, for example. The organization also offers a "Toolbox" in CD form with 900 adaptive aids. Both a print version and CD are available for purchase.

In 2011, AgrAbility will hold its 20th National Training Workshop in Indianapolis on Nov. 7-10, 2011. Among the attendees will be AgrAbility staff and other rehabilitation professionals and farmers with disabilities ranging from stroke to spinal cord injury to amputation. Attendees will have the opportunity to meet with engineers and other professionals and tell their stories to figure out even better adaptations to help them. In addition, AgrAbility is hosting a conference on farming with arthritis at the Beck Educational Center in West Lafayette, Ind., on May 11-13, 2011.

Support AgrAbility

- Volunteers and donations to AgrAbility are always needed. Check out the website (www.agrability.org) to find a project in your area to support.

- Financial contributions help pay for an 800 phone number, fees for farmers with disabilities to attend training workshops, mailings and publications.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, AgrAbility, Breaking New Ground Resource Center, 225 S. University St., West Lafayette, Ind. 47907 (ph 800 825-4264; www.agrability.org).