

AGRABILITY QUARTERLY



Promoting Success in Agriculture for People with Disabilities and Their Families

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A Lifetime of Farming Leaves its Mark

Like any loving daughter, Don Padgett's daughter Genny looks out for her father's health and safety. In fact, Genny immediately thought of her father when she met Joe Young, a service coordinator for the Virginia AgrAbility Project, in the Greenville/Emporium cooperative extension office where she worked. Genny talked to Joe about her father's chronic knee problems and how it was affecting his ability to work on the farm. Genny asked Joe to contact Don to see how AgrAbility could get involved. However, like any proud and independent farmer, Don's response to Joe's phone call was, "Well I get along ok... I'd really rather the money go to someone who needs it much more than I do; the person who is the worst off is the one who should be given these opportunities."

Continuing the Tradition

Sixty-two year old Don Padgett and his wife Mary have been raising beef cattle and farming their 300 acres of corn, wheat, soybeans, cotton, and peanuts since 1968. The beautiful white farmhouse where they raised their son, Jay, and daughter, Genny, has been in the family for a hundred years. The original home's deed is carefully preserved in a glass display case in their home. In addition to the land he owns, Don leases and farms an additional 1,500 acres in surrounding counties. Don's son, Jay, has his own farming operation and the two help each other, managing more than 3,000 acres. However, on any given day they may be separated by over thirteen miles due to the distance between their fragmented farmland.



Don Padgett and his son Jay on the family farm.

A Lifetime of Farming Takes its Toll

The congenital condition *genu varum*, commonly known as bowlegs¹, coupled with farm work has left little cartilage remaining in Don's knees. Years of

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Client Story

Don Padgett

mounting and dismounting tractors, climbing ladders, and performing other farming operations have clearly accelerated the deterioration of his knees. Most people who are born bowlegged eventually grow out of it, but Don has been dealing with knee problems for most of his life. He has had surgeries on his knees as well as cortisone injections, yet nothing has resolved the pain and weakness he manages on a daily basis. Recently, surgeons have recommended replacing Don's knees, along with breaking and resetting the fibula and tibia in both of his legs in an attempt to align them and reduce future strain on the joints. They suggest he undergo this surgery in his mid-sixties to reduce the likelihood that he will have to repeat the procedure more than once. Although a daunting prospect, Don has been receptive to the idea. In the meantime, Don has difficulty climbing the narrow ladders of his five grain bins during harvest season, mounting and dismounting his tractors and trucks, walking long distances, and standing for long periods of time. A lower spinal fusion several years ago has left some numbness in his left leg, which occasionally "gives out" on him. He has also developed arthritis that causes pain in his back, shoulders, hips, and elbows. Perhaps more worrisome than the pain is the risk of getting injured when he works alone and can not call upon his son for help.

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Working with AgrAbility

Kirk Ballin, program coordinator for the Virginia AgrAbility Project, and Joe Young, AgrAbility service coordinator, visited Don in early February 2006 to conduct a farm assessment. During the assessment process, they noticed Don's limitations climbing onto and off his trailers to check the level of grain before hauling it to market. Limitations were caused by increased pain, reduced range of motion, and general weakness. Don could not uncover the truck's bed to load and unload grain because it was difficult to

climb onto the truck and manually position the heavy canvas cover without the help of a roller crank. The weakness in Don's legs and knees not only made moving around the farm difficult, but also set up the potential for secondary injuries caused by slips and falls around machinery. Working with livestock also posed a problem because of general weakness and reduced range of motion. Kirk and Joe discussed Don's challenges and identified the following recommendations that may make day-to-day work tasks more manageable:

- Install spiral staircases and spring-type hatch tops on the five grain bins to make checking the grain level and condition of the grain easier and safer.
- Add/Modify steps on the tractors and combines to make mounting and dismounting safer and easier.
- Install cattle sweepers for isolating cattle when giving vaccinations, calving, and other cattle handling activities.
- Install a roller canvas on his grain trailers for ease of loading and unloading grain.
- Obtain a utility vehicle for ease of traveling around the farm.
- Obtain knee and leg supports to stabilize and support the soft tissue, tendons, and ligaments of the legs and knee joints, thereby helping to relieve pressure on both.
- Install a mirror above the top edge of the grain trailers so that the level and condition of the grain could be checked from the ground without having to climb onto the trailer.



Grain bins showing spiral stairway installation in progress

Next, Kirk, Joe, and Don's family prioritized the recommendations. Since the farms' major source of revenue is derived from grain crops, the group decided that the first modifications should focus on improving Don's ability to independently and safely perform essential tasks related to crop production. A Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) team

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Don Padgett

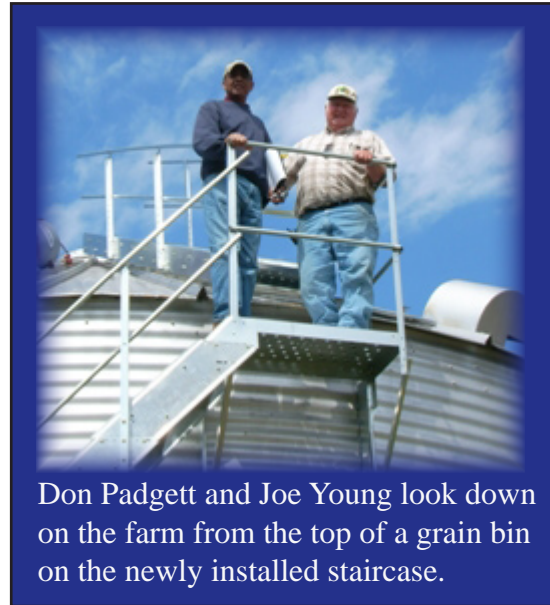
made up of Tom Rybak, a rehabilitation engineer, John Allen, an occupational therapist, and Dolores Heisler, an intake counselor, worked with Don and Virginia AgrAbility on these tasks. Funding from the DRS provided spiral staircases for the three main grain bins and spring type grain bin hatch tops for all five grain bins. The grain bin stairs are now wider and slip-resistant, making it easier and safer for Don to access the top of the bin, and the spring type hatches are much easier to open. In addition, new roller canvases were ordered for two of his three grain trailers and paid for by DRS. The roller covers are made of heavy duty canvas and feature self-locking mechanisms and long cranking arms that allow Don to roll the canvas covers safely and comfortably from the ground. In addition, Virginia AgrAbility referred Don to the Virginia Assistive Technology Loan Fund as a way to finance the purchase of a utility vehicle and modified tractor steps.

A Productive Farm and a Happy Farmer

On March 12, 2007, Don walked up his newly installed spiral stairways for the very first time. As he reached the top of his grain bin, he looked down at AgrAbility staff below him and said with a smile, “I may not be able to zoom up it like you, but I’ll be able to get up these stairs just fine.”

Although Don Padgett still contends that there are farmers worse off than him, he would be happy to stand in a roomful of farmers at any association

meeting and tell them that it’s the little things that count. He appreciates what AgrAbility has done for him, and extends an open invitation to any farmer who wants to visit his farm to check out the steps on the grain bin or his new roller canvas truck covers, and discuss how modifications like these may allow them to work more safely, effectively, and with less pain. Like all farmers, Don is a proud man. He cares



Don Padgett and Joe Young look down on the farm from the top of a grain bin on the newly installed staircase.

deeply about his farming lifestyle, his family, his business, and his fellow farmers. He understands first hand the importance of carrying on that rich tradition. AgrAbility has helped Don make carrying on that tradition a little bit easier. ❖

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The AgrAbility Project promotes success in agriculture for individuals with disabilities and their families through on-site assistance and educational resources. For additional information on the National AgrAbility Project or for a current list of state project sites, addresses, and telephone numbers contact:

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