

ABILITY Program Provides Hope for Farm Families in Sampson County

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When a disability occurs, rural families have far more difficulty accessing services than urban residents. Rural isolation, limited personal resources, gaps in rural service delivery systems, and inadequate access to assistive technology are among the obstacles they face. Until the Family and Consumer Sciences Department started the ABILITY Program in 1996, no program in North Carolina specifically focused on assisting farmers, farm workers, and farm families affected by disabilities.

The ABILITY Program is helping Extension agents in North Carolina establish a statewide support network for disabled farmers and their families. The Program provides counseling, education and referral services to families with disabilities--even helping to modify farm equipment. It also helps train health and social workers in rural areas to deal with the needs of farmers with disabilities.

[Sampson County](#) started participating in the program in 1996. Currently there are five families with whom AgrAbility is working. One of these is a turkey farmer Ms. Kathleen Stein. Like many individuals with disabilities, Ms. Stein, 44, stresses what she can do, instead of what she cannot do. Disabilities resulting from an assault in August of 1993 would have stopped most people from continuing employment, especially looking after thousands of turkeys. Ms. Stein's determination and persistence gave the ABILITY Program and the Sampson County Extension staff the opportunity to help her maintain the farm, make a living, and provide employment opportunities to others.

Ms. Stein runs three turkey houses in the town of Turkey, North Carolina. One is a brooder with the capacity to house 12,500 young turkeys. When the turkeys leave the brooder, they move to one of the other two growout houses. Turkeys are sold at about 20 weeks of age. Ms. Stein, who has what is called a "heavy tom turkey unit," produces for slaughter 50,000 turkeys every year.

Ms. Stein was referred to the ABILITY Program by the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor from Sampson County. When she first contacted the Program, she reported that her 1993 attack had left her with physical and, to some degree, mental disabilities. Her most serious injuries were several skull fractures and bruised brain infarctions, in addition to a severely damaged left arm.

Arthritis and a nerve condition that causes her skin to break limit Ms. Stein's mobility and make walking and sitting difficult. She sometimes experiences difficulty thinking and organizing her work. "It just takes me a little longer than it once did. I'm sometimes two or three seconds behind. I just cannot operate as quickly and as efficiently as most people can." said Ms. Stein.

To help Ms. Stein, the ABILITY staff purchased an electric golf cart, modified her tractor, and assisted in other areas. The golf cart enables her to quickly make daily checks of watering and feeding systems as well as provide the mobility needed for other routine checks. The golf cart pulls a two-wheeled cart loaded with feed used to hand feed turkeys when they are small and under brooders. This method of feeding requires from 30 to 40 stops at feed stations, going from one end of the house to the other.

Ms. Stein's disability made it difficult to use her right leg well enough to operate the foot brakes. Ms. Stein's Ford 1720, three-cylinder tractor, was modified by installing steps, a hand bar, and right-hand brake controls. The tractor's disinfectant spray system was also modified so that Ms. Stein can spray the turkey houses without any help. She does not have to hold the nozzle, because the nozzle rotates 180 degrees. Equipment modifications and purchases were made with money received through a grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. Education and referral services to farmers is supported by the USDA-AgrAbility Program.

Right now, Ms. Stein says she is proud to be able to maintain her farm, making a living and paying taxes, instead of being dependent on public assistance. "It's not easy, but if I wasn't back farming, I'd be living in a housing project somewhere living on government assistance," she said. "How does that benefit anyone?"

Last October, Sampson County hosted approximately 125 people, representing some 25 states and Canada, who were taking part in the three-day 1997 National AgrAbility Conference. A day-long field trip to visit two disabled farmers in Sampson County, one of whom was Ms. Stein, was an integral part of the conference. The farm tour was organized by the Sampson County Extension staff. Also on hand for the tour were two county commissioners, the county manager and other county officials. Since the farm visit, Ms. Stein has received several letters thanking her for the tour of her farm. She is very proud of showing others what she can do, rather than what she cannot do.

Today, due to the NC ABILITY Program's presence, County Extension agents, health care providers, and social service organizations are more aware of the availability of technology devices and services and what technology can do for farmers with disabilities. Farmers with disabilities have learned what is possible with assistive technology and, as a result, have become more successful and productive in agriculture. Ms. Stein is now able to function, no longer falling out of the mainstream because she lives in a rural area or does not qualify for assistance under current systems. In the case of Ms. Stein, the county Extension staff was able to offer resources and training to keep her in the business of farming. Finally, we learned that disability does not stop the desire of farm families to continue farming. In Sampson County, Extension personnel, including the Family and Consumer Education agent, recognize that we can be among the resources rural disabled families need to maintain their livelihood.



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For more information on the ABILITY Program, read the article "[The North Carolina ABILITY Program - Helping Disabled Farmers.](#)"

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