Fifteen miles south of Bedford, Pa., sits a 100-acre organic fruit and vegetable farm owned by Dawn and Rob Custer called Goodness Grows. The couple bought the farm in 1999, and together they grow organic soybeans for Perdue and organic grains for a whiskey distillery; operate a small goat and sheep dairy and livestock farm; host community supported agriculture for 70 members; and offer organic produce to seven restaurants, a grocery store, and five farmers’ markets.

Together – Dawn and Rob are quite the pair. He’s the agronomist, she’s the horticulturalist. They also have three sons together: Caleb, Silas, and Levi. But a few years ago, a serious incident and health diagnosis nearly changed everything.

It was January 2012. Dawn and her family were working together to cut and gather firewood – a task they had been working at for hours. It was getting dark, and Dawn was carrying wood back and forth from the site. The next thing she knew, a cut Locust tree was coming her direction - falling on top of her - hitting her head.

“It hit me square. It was a really bad head accident,” Dawn recalls.

She suffered significant brain swelling, black and blue eyes, lost memory, and the ability to access information and speech temporarily. For more than a year, Dawn suffered from post-concussion syndrome.

“At first, it seemed like owning their own business was a blessing during her recovery. If Dawn wasn’t feeling well enough to work, her husband took care of her tasks around the farm. But as her brain injury healed, her joints and body began hurting. She wasn’t sure what was going on.

That’s when Dawn was delivered a second blow ....

(continued inside)
FROM THE DIRECTOR

As I look ahead this year and think about the future of the AgrAbility for Pennsylvanians Project, I am filled with warm feelings. The project not only has the most important focus of promoting success in agriculture for farmers with a disability or long-term health condition, but we are also staffed with some of the best people I’ve ever worked with, each one deeply invested in the mission of this project. Let me explain.

AgrAbility PA (for short) is thriving thanks to the committed partnership between two statewide organizations – Penn State Extension and UCP Central PA (UCP).

At Penn State,
- Dr. Dennis Murphy, Nationwide Insurance Professor of Agricultural Safety and Health at Penn State University, is well known throughout the state and nation in the field. As our extension safety specialist and co-project director, he assists in general oversight of the project and is available to answer technical questions when working with a farmer.

- Dr. Daniel Foster, Assistant Professor of Agricultural and Extension Education, as well as teacher preparation specialist at Penn State University, serves as the liaison with Pennsylvania agriculture science teachers and the Pennsylvania FFA Association. His professional interactions with teachers are crucial to maintaining a communication stream with these professionals.

- Linda Fetzer is the Project Manager with experience through Easter Seals and for many years as the AgrAbility PA Project Associate. Her dedication, planning, and expertise are invaluable and she keeps the project running smoothly.

- Abbie Spackman joined the project last spring with a host of production agriculture experience. A graduate of Penn State in agricultural and extension education, Abbie serves as the teams’ Case Coordinator and Project Assistant. She is the first person that many farmers talk to when they contact us seeking assistance.

At UCP,
- Janeen Latin, Chief Management Officer at UCP, brings a host of experiences, connections, and ideas to the project.

- Kendra Martin, Digital Media and Outreach Coordinator, is always thinking of new ways to reach Pennsylvanians and especially farmers. She is a dedicated professional with seasoned marketing and communications experience.

- Jackie Wardle is UCP’s Assistive Technology Program Manager and has worked for many years in the field of assistive technology. She identifies new contacts for the database and continually looks for other groups and organizations to expand collaborations within the scope of the project.

As we continue our work together this year, I send my sincerest thank you to my AgrAbility PA colleagues! I am so proud and grateful that each of you are a part of this team. Working together to make a difference in the lives of farmers and agricultural workers across the state has been one of the great joys of being the director of this project.

I couldn’t do it without all of you.

Dr. Connie Baggett
- Project Director, AgrAbility PA
- Associate Professor of Agricultural and Extension Education, Penn State University

Goodness Grows (continued from cover)

A blood test confirmed that Dawn had rheumatoid arthritis. The impact of the diagnosis on her work at the farm would be significant. “What we do around the farm is hard work, and my husband and I were facing some tough questions about the future of our farm with my limitations. I need to be there to help. I want to be there,” Dawn said.

She started searching online for resources and support. Within a few clicks, she came across AgrAbility for Pennsylvanians (AgrAbility PA) and the state’s Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). She reached out and not long after that she was undergoing a farm assessment with an AgrAbility PA staff member, and an occupational therapist and farm coordinator with OVR, to uncover the limitations of her day-to-day work on the farm.

Dawn felt most of the pain in her hips and hands, which is common with rheumatoid arthritis. She could hardly move her body after a day of pulling weeds or picking produce. Carrying the 50-pound crates of vegetables 1,000 feet from the field to the packing shed was no longer possible for her.

Recommendations were made on some specific pieces of assistive technology that would allow Dawn to perform her usual tasks around the farm. OVR provided funding for Dawn to purchase a Pendragon work cart, sit and scoot garden cart, pull-behind Eco Wedder for their tractor, and a John Deere gator utility vehicle for hauling produce crates.

“I’m able to be as productive as I used to be,” Dawn said. “With the assistance I received from AgrAbility PA and OVR, we no longer ask the question: Should we remain in farming? Our farm has a bright future ahead. We had a great 2015.”

Dawn is thrilled to be back to daily farm work and life. And she offers a parting message to not only young farmers entering the industry, but also to those who have long been in it. “As we encourage young farmers to explore careers in agriculture, it is important for them to take care of their body. Farming is brutal on your body, and we need to get it into people’s minds earlier to exercise safety and good ergonomics. The other side of that is that the average farmer in Pennsylvania is in their 50s, and as we age and remain in farming, programs like AgrAbility PA are critical to the success of the future of farming.”

Learn more about the Custer’s farm, Goodness Grows, at www.goodnessgrowspa.com.

Arthritis: A Nation in Pain

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists arthritis or joint inflammation as the single greatest cause of chronic pain and disability for people in the U.S.

- 50 million people in the U.S. have diagnosed arthritis – 3 million in Pennsylvania
- Common forms are Osteoarthritis, Rheumatoid Arthritis, Gout, and Fibromyalgia
- Half of those diagnosed are younger than 65
- Affects women twice as often as men
- Second only to heart disease as a work disability

Learn more at www.arthritis-ag.org.
(Source: Arthritis & Agriculture)

Field Notes www.AgrAbilityPA.org