

Ag Producer Egg-static with New Assistive Technology

Working with AgrAbility PA and PA's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Brian has been able to succeed on his farm and continue his passion for agriculture.

Brian Shepperson started farming after graduating from high school. It wasn't long after working for someone else that Brian and his brother, William, had a chance to buy 86 acres from their uncle. The land had been in the family for decades.

Brian and William started a beef and grain farm. They added a hog barn and a custom butcher shop – butchering deer, beef, and pork. Before they knew it, they had a strong business that was thriving in Sunbury, Pa., nestled in Northumberland County.

When Brian reached his mid-30s, he noticed something was wrong – he was experiencing pain in his back beside his spine and shoulder blade. The pain would often shoot down his right arm. Brian chalked it up to the repetitive nature of using a knife and other butchering tools and equipment. He recalls thinking that this line of work was just starting to take a toll on his body.

By the time Brian reached 40 years of age – his health took a turn for the worse. With the severity and duration of pain increasing, Brian started seeking medical attention to try and figure out what was going on. But he was finding few answers.



Facing Adversity

Then one night in December 2006, Brian went to bed at 11 p.m., only to wake up in the middle of the night with an odd sensation. When he stood up, his leg was dragging. Family members rushed him to a nearby hospital, thinking that Brian was having a stroke.

Brian was in the hospital for several months – he spent time in the intensive care unit, trauma unit, and in-patient rehabilitation facility. Brian and his family learned that he did not have a stroke, but rather a fluid-filled cyst, known as a syrinx, had developed and burst within his spinal cord near his right shoulder. It caused pain, weakness, and severe inflammation that impacted his brain, spinal cord, and with it, his motor skills.

“The doctors described it like jumper cables on a battery not making the correct connection,” Brian said. “For a period of time, I had to blink to communicate.”

Brian was diagnosed with encephalitis myelitis – inflammation of the brain and spinal cord which can disrupt the normal responses from the brain to the rest of the body, and from the rest of the body to the brain. This severe inflammation can result in symptoms such as paralysis and sensory loss. During a year of out-patient therapy, Brian had to re-learn how to walk, talk, stand, and sit, and regain his strength, endurance, and posture control.

Now, Brian is in his mid-fifties, and he uses a walker to aid his mobility. He can walk short distances and stand for periods of time independently. Returning to work on the farm has been an on-going process for him.

Making Adjustments

In 2008, Brian and William added a layer house for chickens on the farm. Brian had to reduce the amount of butchering he was able to do, and the egg business seemed like a better fit for his physical abilities. He purchased some used egg-sorting equipment and secured a contract with a supplier for Pete and Gerry's Organic Eggs, a company based in New Hampshire that prides itself on free range, organic eggs from small family farms.

Pete and Gerry's Organic Eggs

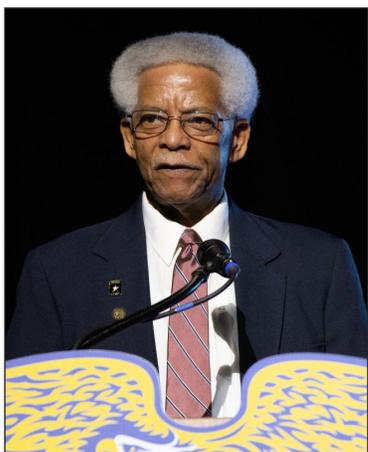
Pete and Gerry's Organic Eggs is a company based in New Hampshire that prides itself on free range, organic eggs from small family farms, like the Sheppersons. Their eggs are available in supermarkets, natural grocers, club stores, and other fine food retailers. In Pennsylvania, you can find Pete and Gerry's Organic Eggs at Giant, Weis, Walmart, BJ's Wholesale, and more.

- Grade A, Certified USDA Organic
- Certified Humane, Free Range
- Non-GMO, No Antibiotics, No Added Hormones, No Pesticides



Brian Shepperson continued inside

For the Director: *Best Wishes, Dr. Connie Baggett!*



After more than 25 years, Dr. Connie Baggett is stepping down as project director of the AgrAbility for Pennsylvanians Project, otherwise known as AgrAbility PA. He will also retire from Penn State University later this year as an associate professor of agricultural and extension education.

Dr. Baggett has been a steadfast supporter and agricultural advocate not only professionally, but also personally – giving his time and talents to work with farmers and their families with disabilities and health conditions impacting their work and livelihood on the farm. He laid the foundation for what AgrAbility PA is today – one of the crucial pieces was connecting farmers with PA's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) to receive aid in funding equipment, modifications, and assistive technology.

Dr. Baggett has worked with many people over the years – yes, farmers, but also statewide partners in agencies, organizations, and non-profits alike. His own background in farming and military service has served as connection points to those whose passion is agriculture.

As PA Department of Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding wrote, "Dr. Baggett has dedicated his career to the belief in agriculture's ability to transform lives. My thanks to him for a career of faithful service to the agricultural industry, and best wishes for a prosperous future."

Thank you, Dr. Baggett, for your exceptional leadership and commitment to AgrAbility PA!



Brian Shepperson continued from cover

Things seemed to be moving in the right direction, but after a few years and some other health concerns, Brian was finding it difficult to keep up a full-day, 9+ hours of packing and stacking eggs. On average, he was processing 18,000 eggs a day. In addition, the equipment was constantly in need of repair.

"It was totally worn out – the service man didn't want it for parts or anything," Brian said.

Contacting AgrAbility PA

Brian knew about AgrAbility PA. He worked with AgrAbility PA and PA's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) to make modifications to his butchering equipment when he first returned to work on the farm. He still butchers about 15 hours a week. Brian reached out to Abbie Spackman in late 2016 with his concerns about the egg packing process.

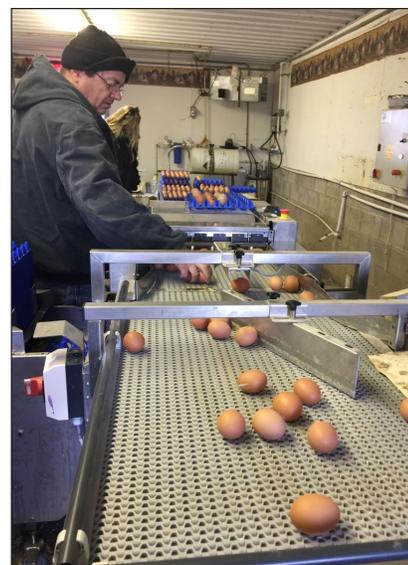
After a farm evaluation and assessment from AgrAbility PA and OVR, one of the key recommendations was a new egg packer as a piece of assistive technology. With 129,000 eggs a week being handled during peak pick-ups, this piece of equipment was essential to Brian's success and independence in employment. "Brian's medical condition impacted the dexterity and motor control in his hands, making it difficult and painful for him manually to pack eggs. Implementing an egg packer was key

to maintaining Brian's independence on the farm," said Abbie, AgrAbility PA's project assistant.

In December 2017, OVR was able to help Brian acquire a STAALKAT FarmPacker 70, which can process some 25,000 eggs an hour. Today, Brian is able to use this piece of assistive technology to complete his work in a more efficient and safe way.

Brian is so grateful to the AgrAbility PA team, the staff at OVR, and everyone who is making a difference to keep farmers farming. He can't imagine doing anything else.

"Don't hesitate to contact AgrAbility PA," Brian said. "If you can use assistive technology to ease the pain and strain from the day, it will make your life better. To have the financial help from OVR... that was a true blessing!"



AgrAbility PA Regional Workshop: Save The Date!

Oct 8-9, 2019 | Days Inn Penn State

AgrAbility PA is excited to announce that we will host a regional workshop in conjunction with the National AgrAbility Project in STATE COLLEGE, PA! This two-day workshop is a great opportunity to learn more about occupational therapy and assistive technology on the farm –working together to keep farmers farming!

The first day will include sessions and a farmer panel; the second day will include farm tours of AgrAbility PA-connected farms and farmers.

In addition to those who are interested in assisting farmers with a disability or long-term health condition, this workshop would be helpful to:

- ▶ Service providers (VR, state agencies, governmental orgs)
- ▶ Agricultural professionals (Extension, FFA, ag educators)
- ▶ Occupational/Physical therapists, staff, teachers, and students
- ▶ Staff from other state AgrAbility projects and those working in ag safety, health, and wellness

Registration and reservation details: agrabilitypa.org or (814) 867-5288



AgrAbility PA Contest: 2019 Winners!

AgrAbility PA named Pequea Valley FFA and Grassland FFA as winners in the 2019 AgrAbility PA Contest. The contest provides an opportunity for any Pennsylvania FFA Association chapter to make a positive impact by enhancing independence or promoting success for farmers and their families with disabilities or long-term health conditions.

Two students with Pequea Valley FFA won for their development of an app-based feeder as an assistive technology model. Students with Grassland FFA won for their service project at Saddle Creek Farm. Each chapter will receive a \$400 award thanks to UCP Central PA Foundation.



Students were recognized in June during Pennsylvania FFA's 90th State Convention & Activities Week at Penn State.

"We are pleased to recognize these students, in conjunction with their FFA chapter, whom exemplify not only the core principles of the Pennsylvania FFA – Purpose, Passion, and Potential – but also for their leadership to serve their communities at large with their time and talents," said Dr. Baggett.

Honorable mentions: two additional student groups at **Pequea Valley High School FFA**, students at **Blue Juniata FFA**, and students at **Central Columbia FFA**.



Contact Us

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CULTIVATING ACCESSIBLE AGRICULTURE

one farm family at a time

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AgrAbility for Pennsylvanians is a state-wide partnership between Penn State Extension and UCP Central PA.



UPCOMING EVENTS!

PSU's Ag Progress Days

PA's Largest Outdoor Agricultural Exposition
Aug 13-15, 2019 | Russell E. Larson Agricultural Research Center
Pennsylvania Furnace, PA
Details: <https://agsci.psu.edu/apd>

Child Agricultural Injury Prevention Workshop: Protecting The Future of Agriculture

Sept. 17-18, 2019 | Hershey Lodge | Hershey, PA
Register: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/8VSLK55>

Vision For The Future: Financial Empowerment Conference for Individuals with Disabilities

Sponsored by Pennsylvania Assistive Technology Foundation (PATF)
Oct. 3, 2019 | Harrisburg, PA
Register: patf.us

AgrAbility PA Regional Workshop Occupational Therapy & Assistive Technology On The Farm

Oct 8-9, 2019 | Days Inn Penn State | State College, PA
Register: agrabilitypa.org

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau 69th Annual Meeting Health & Safety Fair

Nov. 19 | Hershey Lodge | Hershey, PA
Details: pfb.com



**Look for AgrAbility PA
at these events!**

**Learn more:
agrabilitypa.org**