



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contacts

Kelly Gagnon
Phone: (765) 721-4348
Email: kelly@grithq.org

Dr. Robert Aherin
AgrAbility Program Director
(217) 333-9417
raherin@illinois.edu

February 21, 2019

AgrAbility Gives Northern Illinois Sheep Farmer Freedom

BIG ROCK, IL - Lambing season is Donna Lehrer's favorite time on her family's small farm an hour west of Chicago. But seven years ago a ram collided with Donna leaving her with chronic pain and mobility issues that require a walker. Now, with new gate latches, a golf cart and self-powered cart from AgrAbility Unlimited, Donna is able to get around the farm and she hopes Big Rock Organics will have lambs again soon.

It's estimated that more than one million people engaged in agricultural production are restricted from performing essential tasks due to physical limitation. AgrAbility Unlimited, a program of University of Illinois Extension, seeks to promote independence in agriculture for people with disabilities and their families.

"It's a really hazardous occupation when you look at statistics," Lehrer said. "I don't think that when people eat their food and use their fiber realize what it takes."

Donna and Scott have farmed for more than 20 years at Big Rock Organics. They grow heirloom vegetables organically for farmer's markets and their CSA, community supported agriculture, program. Fiber from their flock of Cheviot sheep is used at the arts studio in town run by her daughter and the meat is sold throughout Chicago.

After the accident, Donna and Scott were able to rely on help from their daughter and interns, but as her husband Scott's early onset Alzheimer's progressed, he was not able to do as many chores.

That's when Lehrer met Chip Petrea with Illinois AgrAbility Unlimited. He visited the farm for a consultation and almost immediately suggested cutting down a barn door threshold so it wasn't a struggle for Lehrer to step through, adding ramps and adjusting the sheep gates.

-MORE-



“You do things out of habit and you don’t change. Chip took one look and said ‘why don’t you cut down the door threshold lower and make it easier?’ ”

Some changes gave Donna the independence she needed, like a golf cart and self-powered wagon for moving hay that AgrAbility was able to help purchase. “AgrAbility is one of the best programs the USDA can offer,” Lehrer said. “It’s hope for someone who wants to continue farming.”

And Donna wants to pass on that hope to others. Big Rock Organics has hosted several veterans through an Illinois Farm Bureau program that introduces veterans to farming.

“I don’t ever want to stop farming, once you get it under your belt and you’ve been doing it, it’s a way of life,” Lehrer said. “ I’m excited to be called a farmer and I’m proud of the whole occupation big or small.”

AgrAbility Unlimited, offers comprehensive assistance to individuals and families engaged in farming activities who have been affected by a disability. It is estimated that AgrAbility has provided direct, on-farm services to more than 11,900 people since it began in 1991 plus resources and indirect services, such as information/referral, to hundreds of thousands.

Building on the strength a statewide network of agricultural, rural health, safety and social agencies, AgrAbility Unlimited offers individualized services aimed at increasing self-sufficiency and independence. For more information, you can visit agrabilityunlimited.org or follow AgrAbility Unlimited on Facebook www.facebook.com/AgrAbilityIllinois/.

###