

Within seconds, Dennis Schmitz's life changed forever. Truth be told, it nearly ended. ON the morning of Jan. 19, 1999, Dennis was grinding feed for his livestock, a task he had completed hundreds of times before. But on this cold winter day, the northwest Missouri farmer's vigilance lapsed as he worked near the tractor's PTO. Without warning, the spinning shaft grabbed Dennis' coat, pulling him into the machinery. His entangled clothing twisted and tightened, breaking bones and throwing him to the ground. Eventually, the PTO tore his shirts and coats off. As quickly as he had been caught, Dennis was free. "It broke my right arm 18 times and it wrapped around my left arm so tight that it destroyed the main artery in it," he says of the accident. "It wrapped the coats around my neck so tight that it made my eyes bleed. It broke my collarbone, three ribs, gave me severe burns over most of the upper part of my body, and it broke my neck four times."

After several surgeries and months of rehabilitation, Dennis returned to farming. To look at him today at age 44, you would be hard-pressed to guess he had been in such a horrific accident. But the effects still linger. "There isn't anything that I don't do today that I didn't do back the, it's just that I can't do it as easily," explains the United Electric Cooperative member who lives south of Parnell, Mo. "It either hurts or I can't do it as long now, or I do it differently."

Dennis is one of an estimated 37,000 to 55,000 farmers and ranchers with disabilities in Missouri. In August, he became the first to receive a unique farmhand through an innovative new program. Roy, a 3 year old Border Collie, has joined Dennis and his family through the PHARM Dog Program, which seeks to pair farmers with disabilities with dogs who can assist with various tasks around the farm, including herding livestock and special skills such as opening gates, carrying buckets or retrieving tools.

"PHARM stands for 'Pets Helping Agriculture in Rural Missouri,'" says Jackie Allenbrand, a specialist with the Missouri AgrAbility Project, who originated the idea 4 years ago. "The goal is to help farmers remain independent, active and productive in agriculture by providing them with a dog trained for their specific needs. It's been a long road to get here, but Roy is the first dog we've placed through the program."

While using dogs for herding or service work is not a new idea, teaming such animals with farmers with disabilities at no cost to the farmer certainly is. According to AgrAbility Program Director Karen Funkenbusch, Missouri is the only state to implement such a program. "When you can give a farmer with a disability an extra set of hands—or in this case, paws—to help out, you're giving that farmer an opportunity to remain successful," she says.

With the help of partnering agencies, including University of Missouri Extension and Midland Empire Resources for Independent Living, Jackie secured a small starter grant for the PHARM Dog program in 2005. After two unsuccessful attempts to obtain a dog to demonstrate her idea, she finally received Kristy, a 6 month old Lab/Shepherd mix in Sept. 2008. Rescued from a shelter, Kristy received training to show skills that would benefit a disabled farmer. "She is a magnet," Jackie says. "Everybody wants to come and see what the dog is doing."

Though the word has spread gradually, finding the necessary funding to purchase and train dogs has been hard to come by. Well-trained herding dogs can cost \$2500 to \$3500, and dogs for service purposed cost at least \$5000 and can run \$30,000 or more, depending on the level of training.

Through a fortunate series of events, Jackie made a connection in April '09 with Bobby Miller, a Border Collie breeder and trainer in Plattsburg, Mo. He agreed to not only donate dogs to the program but also the training for both dogs and the farmers. In the process, he convinced a fellow trainer, Virgil Miles of Tonganoxie, KS to do the same. Roy came from Virgil's farm. "Things have really moved quickly these past few months," Jackie says. "We hope to place a second PHARM dog with a southwest Missouri farmer in the next three to four months."

In addition to dogs and trainers, Jackie is working to line up others to help the program grow. She says as more puppies are donated, she'll need to identify "puppy raisers," people willing care for a pup and return it when it's old enough to be trained. While Jackie has found one supplier for dog food, she's seeking others, as well as a company willing to donate veterinary medical supplies.

“Farmers help us so much by raising our food supply that we need to give back to them, and my goal is to make this a 100 percent no-cost program,” she says, adding at that at this time, there still costs involved for farmers who request a service dog. As with other assistance from Missouri AgrAbility, a farmer need not be in an accident to qualify for the PHARM Dog program. Those eligible for services may have any type of disability, disease or disorder, including such ailments as arthritis, vision impairment, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, hearing impairment or stroke.

“This is something we’ve needed for a long time,” says Sandy Rickey, a widowed farmer from Odessa and a member of West Central Electric Cooperative. “I’m hoping that it’ll take off and just go.” Sandy is helping Jackie demonstrate the potential of dogs to assist with farmwork. For more than 20 yrs, she has farmed with a trained dog by her side. Currently, Barbed Wire Abe, a 9 yr old wire mouth heeler, helps her care for her sheep, goats and chickens. In addition to herding, Abe opens gates and performs other tasks.

“You’d be surprised how handy it comes in,” she says. “If I need something, I don’t go get it: I send him. If you understand your dog and you work with him all the time, he’ll get to where he knows you. Dogs are only limited by what we’re able to teach them.” Having Roy to herd the sheep and cattle on the Schmitz’s Nodaway County farm gives Dennis a chance to conserve energy he would have to otherwise expend on the tasks. This allows him to use that energy toward another goal—helping his sons establish themselves in the family business. “This is all I’ve ever wanted to do, and I’m helping them get started,” he says. “We’ve expanded a lot this last year, and this dog is going to help us with that expansion.”

There have been a few growing pains so far. On Roy’s first day on the job, a cow stepped on him, and he’s been a little ‘cow shy’ since. He’s really working well with the sheep, however. “Everybody asks how we’re getting along,” Dennis says. “I tell them we get better every time we go out. Last time we went out, it was almost like he looked at me and said, ‘Oh, you want me to go get those sheep, don’t you?’ And he just took off. ‘I’ve still got some learning to do,’” adds Dennis, “but we’re learning together.”

*For more details on the PHARM Dog program, contact Jackie Allenbrand by phone at 816-279-8558 ext. 1026 or by email at [allenbrandj@missouri.edu](mailto:allenbrandj@missouri.edu). Those interested in learning more about the Missouri AgrAbility Project and its services may call 800-995-8503 or visit [www.agrability.missouri.edu](http://www.agrability.missouri.edu).*

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