

AGRABILITY QUARTERLY



Promoting Success in Agriculture for People with Disabilities and Their Families

**Winter 2008
Vol. 8, No. 2**

In This Issue...

Client Story

Andy & Hilda Byrd
pages 1-3

Focus

Peer Support
pages 3-6

Project Feature

Georgia
pages 6-7

References

page 8

The National Grant Program
of the AgrAbility Project
is a joint effort of

The USDA Cooperative
State Research, Education
and Extension Service

University of Wisconsin-
Cooperative Extension

Easter Seals, Inc.

Welcome to Whippoorwill Hollow

Becky Brightwell, project manager of AgrAbility in Georgia, often compares Georgia farmer and AgrAbility client Andy Byrd to Walt Disney. While Andy Byrd is not a famous screen producer and Walt Disney was not an organic farmer with a disability, Andy, like Walt Disney, is a visionary. It was Andy's vision that helped him create Whippoorwill Hollow Organic Farms all from the seat of his 4x4 wheelchair.

Andy and Hilda Byrd grew up only a few miles from each other in a small Georgia town, called Walnut Grove. Andy Byrd's family owned a grocery store and everything Hilda's large farming family didn't grow themselves, they would buy at the Byrd's grocery. While Hilda was growing up on the farm, Andy was dreaming of having a farm of his own. As a young adult Andy sustained a C5-C6 spinal cord injury from a diving accident at his family's lake house that left him with quadriplegia. Two years later Andy and Hilda were married and in November of 1997, after many years of running a variety of small non-farm businesses, they finally purchased a farm of their own on seventy-four acres in



Andy and Hilda Byrd enjoy a quiet moment on the farm.

Client Story

Andy & Hilda Byrd

Covington, Georgia. The Byrds started with a “pick your own” blueberry operation in 1999, and by 2002 they had certified ten acres for organic fruit and vegetable production.

In addition to on-farm sales, they sell produce at three local farmer’s markets, and in 2006 started a community supported agriculture (CSA) enterprise. Today, Whippoorwill Hollow is a USDA certified organic farm that offers a diverse array of things to see and do. The farm produces a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, and herbs. The Byrds also raise an assortment of animals—rabbits, sheep, chickens and horses—and crops for food, fertilizer and agri-tourism.

The Byrd’s business is not solely about production; they are very committed to education and community service. Educational tours are available year round to illustrate how food is planted and harvested before it arrives on the table. School groups, organic farmers and university students learn about growing crops for food and organic farming practices. Visitors take a seedling plant from the greenhouse to the field to re-plant it, then harvest a crop from the garden and take it to another area of the farm to see how it is processed. Young visitors leave the farm with a Dixie cup containing a seed they take home to plant and nurture. Someday the Byrds would like to have a general store and café on site, so guests can see how a product moves full circle from the ground to their mouths.

In addition to group tours, the Byrds host a number of special community events at their farm, including a

Native American Powwow, an Earth Day celebration, and “Field of Greens,” a benefit event for the Georgia Organics mentoring program.

Managing such an active and rapidly expanding farm is a lot of work, and the Byrds are continually looking for ways Andy can work more independently on the farm. In 2005, while working with William Carlin, a local county extension agent, the Byrds learned about AgrAbility. In early 2006, Jessica Forbes and Becky Brightwell from AgrAbility in Georgia met with the Byrds and conducted a farm site assessment. Together, the Byrds and AgrAbility staff identified three of Andy’s current work needs/priorities; expanding the business, managing the business end of the operation independently, and increasing hands-on involvement in daily farm work.

Becky and Jessica put Andy in touch with the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Georgia. Carol McDonnell, from the SBDC, met with Andy to work on developing a business plan for

achieving future growth of the farm. “I think [SBDC] brought us to where we can focus on certain things, kind of bringing the whole circle down into a little bit smaller circle to where you can start prioritizing,” says Andy. AgrAbility in Georgia referred Andy to Tech-Able, Inc., one of Georgia’s five Assistive Technology Resource Centers funded under the Assistive Technology Act. The Tech-Able representative taught Andy how to use Dragon Naturally Speaking, a speech recognition software program that transcribes Andy’s dictated words into written text, enabling him to independently answer e-mails and manage the farm’s bookkeeping.



Andy displays a garden tool fitted with the StrongArm device he uses for working in raised beds.

Client Story

Andy & Hilda Byrd

Andy designed semi-raised beds for vegetable crops in his fields and made three-foot wide walkways between every third row so that he could check on the plants from his wheelchair. But Andy wanted to do more. AgrAbility in Georgia arranged for University of Georgia students and community members to build permanent raised flower beds to expand his product base and allow him to actively work in the beds from his wheelchair. AgrAbility staff also fitted electric pruning shears to the StrongArm. The StrongArm, a holding device designed for fishing, allows people with limited use of their hands to transfer holding to the muscles in the forearm, bicep, and shoulder. The height of the flower beds, combined with adaptive gardening tools fitted to the StrongArm device, allow Andy to do just that. “AgrAbility has given us some help to make our vision move forward...to make it more possible. We wouldn’t be where we are now if it weren’t for the connection to AgrAbility,” Andy asserts.



Andy talking with customers in his greenhouse at Whippoorwill Hollow

Hilda recently took on the role of peer support coordinator with AgrAbility in Georgia. She and Andy are committed to being positive role models for other farmers/ranchers with disabilities by showing them that the challenges of farming with a disability can be overcome by teamwork, assistive technology, and the desire to succeed.

Though Andy and Hilda have already achieved so much at Whippoorwill Hollow Organic Farms, they continue to dream, and in the process they are enriching the lives of so many others. The Byrds have been working with landscape architects and other professionals to ensure that the farm is fully accessible, so that, as Andy says: “People in a wheelchair can sit anywhere and go anywhere they want to, not just in designated places.” Andy and Hilda have big plans for the future of their farm, and their invitation to the public is always “come watch us grow.” ❖

Focus

Peer Support

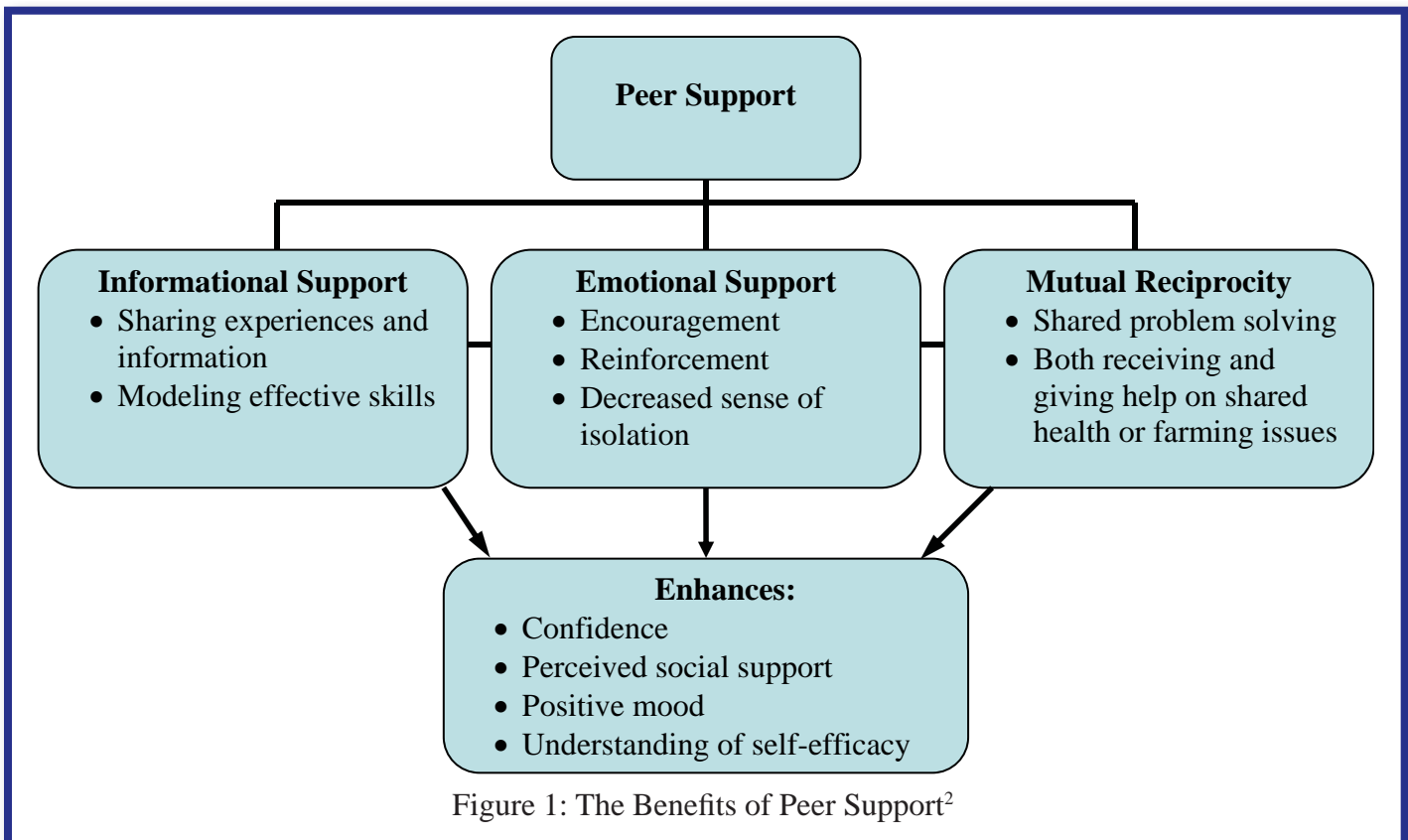
Peer Support

What is Peer Support?

Chances are that most of us have experienced peer support at some point during our lives. Turning to a friend, neighbor, family member, or even a stranger for assistance, guidance, or simply to talk to, are all forms of peer support. The peer support relationship is based on a sharing of experiences, mutual respect, and empathy; in these ways, the function of peer support can be very similar to that of having a best friend.¹

The concept of peer support as a rehabilitative tool goes beyond being a best friend, by providing both emotional and informational support. Peer support is a one-on-one relationship between two people who share similar lifestyles and experiences. Peer supporters are typically trained to listen non-judgmentally, offer emotional support, share their experiences of struggling with a disability, disease, or other life changing event,

and discuss community resources and coping mechanisms that worked for them. By serving as role models, sharing experiences, and offering support to another individual, peer supporters also enhance their self-confidence. See figure 1.



Peer support as a tool in therapy was first used in 1935 by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The premise of AA is that people who had experienced and overcome alcoholism could be more effective than professionals in assisting others who wished to become sober.³ Today peer support is used effectively with recovering substance abusers, victims of physical or sexual abuse, people living with chronic conditions, breast cancer survivors, amputees, and other disabling conditions.⁴ Peer support can be delivered through support groups, peer-led face-to-face meetings, telephone-based interactions, or web and email-based programs. The definition of what constitutes peer support is as varied as the diverse array of peer support programs in existence, yet the fundamental principle is the same: Individuals who have similar life experiences can better relate and thus offer more effective emotional support and practical advice in helping another person through a difficult situation.⁴

Peer Support and AgrAbility

Farmers, ranchers, and their families experience a unique array of external and internal stressors while pursuing their chosen career in agriculture. Often, sources of stress are outside their control, such as weather, farm prices, and equipment breakdowns. A disability may add another layer of stress that may not only affect the psychological health of the person with the disability and his or her family, but may also threaten the day-to-day operation of the farm and its financial stability. Whether due to a conservative ethic, a desire to be self-sufficient, or the lack of adequate health care services, farmers and ranchers are less likely to seek counseling or

other public resources than their urban counterparts.⁵ Where do farmers/ranchers go to cope with these stresses, or learn how to farm with a disability? This is where peer support can help.

An AgrAbility peer support program can be a natural extension of an already existing support system. Farmers and ranchers have practiced the principles of peer support for generations by helping each other in times of need. Sometimes the support is provided over a cup of coffee with a neighbor or at a community event where friends and families come together to meet a specific farmer's challenge. Farmers are more likely to accept encouragement and support from someone they relate to, rather than a paid professional.

From an AgrAbility program's perspective, peer support volunteers can be a cost effective way to mobilize rural resources and organize supportive networks that provide encouragement and motivation, sharing of experiences, and examples of healthy coping strategies. AgrAbility peer supporters are not expected to be therapists or social

AgrAbility projects have developed different models of peer support based on their farmers' interests and programmatic needs:

AgrAbility of Wisconsin (AAW) Neighbor to Neighbor Program: AAW organizes informal social gatherings of clients and potential clients in different locations across the state as a way for potential AgrAbility clients to learn more about AgrAbility services and to mingle with fellow farmers with disabilities who have adapted their farm operation to meet their needs.

Breaking New Ground (BNG) Barn Builders: Breaking New Ground in Indiana has created a directory of farmers/ranchers willing to provide peer support and become personally involved in the lives of others. Any farmer, rancher, or family member has access to this directory to find a farmer or rancher with a disability who is willing to share his or her experiences. Farmers/ranchers wishing to find a peer supporter may contact the Barn Builder program at www.barnbuilders.info and BNG staff will assist them.

Minnesota FenceLine Volunteer Program: Minnesota AgrAbility started their FenceLine program (<http://safety.cfans.umn.edu/map/Volunteers.html>) in 1992 to introduce new AgrAbility clients who wanted to talk to former AgrAbility clients about their experience of farming with a disability. Annual volunteer and caregiver trainings keep volunteers interested and updated on peer support issues and Minnesota AgrAbility activities.

Oklahoma AgrAbility Peer Support Advocates: Oklahoma's Peer Support Advocates (http://agrability.okstate.edu/peer_support.html) attend annual trainings to enhance their communication skills and knowledge of available resources. Oklahoma AgrAbility connects peer advocates with current AgrAbility clients, and further contact between the farmers is made through personal letters, phone calls, or on-site visits. Oklahoma AgrAbility monthly newsletters keep peer advocates informed and inspired.

Colorado AgrAbility Neighbor to Neighbor Peer Support: Colorado AgrAbility conducts formal training of their peer support volunteers in communication skills, coping mechanisms and self-assessment which empowers the peer supporter to be more effective in supporting other farmers with similar disabilities, agricultural operations, or experiences. Colorado AgrAbility links the peer supporters to farmers with a newly acquired disability or physical challenge and fosters the development of a beneficial relationship.

Focus

Peer Support

workers but rather someone who has effectively faced similar life stresses and challenges and is willing to listen, empathize, and provide information, reassurance, and friendship.

The ideal personal characteristics of AgrAbility peer supporters include having a positive attitude, a high regard for themselves and for others, being genuine, empathetic, respectful and accepting, and of course, possessing the desire to help others.

AgrAbility peer support programs are either informal or formalized, based on the level of involvement between the peer supporter and the person being supported. If an AgrAbility peer support program matches a farmer with a specific peer support volunteer, the volunteer has typically participated in a training program to prepare for the support role. Training topics include active listening, building rapport, coping skills and adjustment to a disability, problem solving, recognizing signs of stress, and maintaining a healthy, objective support relationship. ❖

Project Feature

Georgia

AgrAbility in Georgia

Agriculture is Georgia’s largest industry. According to a 2006 University of Georgia study, one in every seven Georgians works in an agricultural-related sector of the economy. AgrAbility in Georgia began three years ago with the mission of serving the state’s farmers, ranchers, and farm family members with disabilities. AgrAbility in Georgia is a partnership between the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service (UGA CES) in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and the Institute on Human Development & Disability (IHDD) at the College of Family and Consumer Sciences. AgrAbility in Georgia also has a strong relationship with The Shepherd Center, one of the nation’s leading rehabilitation hospitals. The Shepherd Center has referred

several of their patients to the Georgia AgrAbility program. The center has also collaborated with AgrAbility to train local occupational, physical and recreational therapists to work with farmers and ranchers with disabilities. Other active partners involved in Georgia’s AgrAbility program are AgGeorgia Farm Credit, Georgia’s Network of Assistive Technology Resource Centers, Georgia Cattlemen’s Association, and USDA-Farm Service Agency.

GA in a Minute: Quick Facts⁶

- Number of farms: 49,000
- Average size of farm: 218 acres
- Top five agriculture commodities:
Poultry, cotton, chicken eggs, cattle/calves,
greenhouse/nursery crops

A Community-Centered Approach

AgrAbility in Georgia strives for a holistic approach in serving farmers and ranchers with disabilities, and believes that by bringing community members, health care professionals, students, and funding sources together, sustainable solutions may be developed. In the past few years, more than 200 community members consisting of farmers, family members, and health professionals from small, rural areas around the state have attended informational workshops conducted by AgrAbility in Georgia. In addition to learning about assistive technology and farming with a disability, the workshop gives community members the opportunity to build relationships and to network with each other.

AgrAbility in Georgia also takes full advantage of its partnership with the University of Georgia by involving

college students in service learning projects for AgrAbility farmers. In addition to the example of students constructing raised flower beds for the Byrds, a landscape architect student from the College of Environment and Design created a layout design plan to help Andy and Hilda organize their visions for the growth of Whippoorwill Hollow Farm.

Peer Support

In 2006, AgrAbility in Georgia hired Hilda Byrd to develop its Peer Support Network. Andy and Hilda Byrd are no strangers to the concept of peer support. For the past four years they have been part of the Georgia Organics Farmer-to-Farmer

Mentoring Program. The program pairs established organic farmers with others who are just beginning, in order to assist in the transfer of knowledge and expertise in organic farming. In addition, Andy and Hilda have hosted at their home farmers with disabilities who are interested in organic farming.

Hilda's vision for the program is to continue building the connections between farmers, extension agents, and AgrAbility staff. She says that right now, "We mainly want to get people to take that first step to make the phone call into the program, and get them signed up. Once we get more people involved with AgrAbility, we can then build the [peer support] program from there." Hilda truly believes in the power of peer support, and says that the most important part is the connection; whether it is through a telephone call, a written letter, or a face-to-face conversation. Future plans include peer support themed pot luck dinners with AgrAbility clients and community members, plus Garden Club events in collaboration with the Shepherd Center. Hilda has a great source of inspiration for her new role as peer support coordinator by her side every single day—Andy.

Contact AgrAbility in Georgia

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AgrAbility in Georgia Staff

Glen Rains, PhD, PE, principal investigator and associate professor, oversees management of the project. Glen has been in the Department of Biological and Agricultural Engineering at UGA CES for nine and a half years and has been serving as principle investigator of the program since 2005. Glen also has fifteen years of experience in the field of safety, including working at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Rebecca Brightwell, MBA, program manager, oversees all aspects of the Georgia AgrAbility project, which she has been involved with since April 2005. Rebecca is also associate director of the UGA IHDD and has been employed there for five years. She came to UGA from the Walt Disney World Company, where she gained more than ten years of experience in marketing and finance.

Jessica Forbes, B.S., project coordinator, serves as the primary contact point of the Georgia AgrAbility program. Jessica has a background in child and family development and has been working with both AgrAbility and UGA IHDD since August of 2005. She is very instrumental in developing partnerships, advocating for farmers and coordinating all of the community events.

Hilda Byrd, B.S., peer coordinator, coordinates the peer network in North Georgia. Hilda has been part of AgrAbility since April 2006. Along with working for UGA IHDD, Hilda co-owns Whippoorwill Hollow Organic Farm, established in 1997, with her husband Andy. She has a degree in recreational therapy and has worked in nursing homes in the past. ❖

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The AgrAbility Project promotes success in agriculture for individuals with disabilities and their families through on-site assistance and educational resources. For additional information on the National AgrAbility Project or for a current list of state project sites, addresses, and telephone numbers contact:

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The AgrAbility Project is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture CSREES. Funding for this document was provided under project number 2004-41590-01880.