**Conference Summary: "NAP Workshop Brings Winning Spirit to Farmers"**

**by conference participant and farmer Pamela Martin**

**Lone Willow Farm, Franklin, NC**

Cherished for its unbridled spirit, the Kentucky Bluegrass Region was a befitting host for the 2014 AgrAbility National Training Workshop. Synonymous with its winning mindset, Kentucky is the home of legendary racehorses that are gifted with talent and have learned how to beat the odds. This same grit and determination champions the hearts of AgrAbility farmers and the national project that continues to support them through the home stretch.

For the past 23 years, The National AgrAbility Project has made great strides in bringing together dedicated farmers, ranchers, partners and suppliers of assistive technology, to share their experiences and vital know-how. Guests at this year’s workshop were enlightened by over 40 technical presentations and proactive sessions that presented the newest technology and information to farmers and ranchers seeking more independence. Each session encouraged individuals to share their expertise and working levels, as well as their hopes for future community awareness.

Strengthening client services is a challenge graciously accepted by leaders like Janet LaBreck. Commissioner for the Rehabilitation Service Administration at the U.S. Department of Education, Ms. LaBreck gave a wonderful keynote address. Accompanied by her service dog, Osbourne, Commissioner LaBreck expressed her understanding of what it means to overcome life’s obstacles. Although she lost her sight as a young child, LaBreck’s vision for identifying the appropriate need for disability resources has always been exceptional. With a strong desire to provide more economic opportunities, and her relentless advocacy, Commissioner LaBreck’s words endeared her to the audience and provided much needed encouragement for creating opportunities.

Opportunity was at the forefront of conversation during the Farmers Only Luncheon held on April 2nd. Event coordinators respectfully arranged the social gathering that was pulled off without a hitch. Everyone was encouraged to interact and discuss his or her own personal story. Setting aside time to meet with peers was especially important for recharging. Guests were surprised with door prizes, t-shirts and a lot of witty one-liners. Farmer’s from all over the nation discussed the upcoming spring buzz, and of course, the mean season’s most exciting agricultural topic- surviving the *worst* winter weather in recent memory!

But AgrAbility folks know what it means to weather unexpected hardships,

just like former Lance Corporal Josh Bliell, who is currently the community spokesperson for the Indianapolis Colts. Guests had the opportunity to chat with Josh, who wowed the crowd with his courageous story. Josh was serving in the United States Marine Corp, when a roadside bomb blasted the Humvee that he and two other service members were patrolling in. Chronicled in his book, *One Step at a Time: A Young Marine’s Story of Courage, Hope and a New Life in the NFL*, Bliell talked about his two-years of rehabilitation after waking up from a coma in 2006. Having lost both of his legs, Josh faced a long journey. Like many of the AgrAbility client farmers that have learned to connect and rebuild their lives, Josh’s poignant story hit close to home, and ended with a riveting standing ovation for his courage and service.

The power and incentive to serve others is a true gift, and I can think of no greater gift to the service of NAP than Michele Proctor, the North Carolina AgrAbility Coordinator.

When I reached out to Michele back in 2012, I had no idea that I would receive such a great level of caring and professionalism. I was new at looking in the mirror and recognizing myself as disabled. Thankfully, Michele gently walked me through my issues of pride while working hard to solve the watering needs on our farm. Her approach was gentle, yet behind that soft voice was an incredible problem solver and technical mind that could see the finish line. So it was no surprise to me that she received the Breaking New Ground Achievement Award at this year’s banquet.

My fellow AgrAbility client farmer, Cliff Hassell, also echoed these sentiments. Cliff appreciates the need for NAP and what it means to have support from people like Michele. Cliff’s journey to Lexington proved meaningful and eye opening to the Camden, North Carolina farmer. Farming grains and eight acres of vegetables, Hassell was impressed with the Assistive Technology Show and Tell facilitated by Steve Swain. Normally restricted to a wheelchair, Cliff was introduced to power wheelchairs that enable individuals to stand up.

“Stand up lifts would work great for me on my tractors,” Hassell said. “Trying to get a little bit of help makes things easier in life. I took so much in. You get so much information.”

Sharing inspirational stories, developing creative partnerships, and providing support are the races that bring home the Triple Crown for AgrAbility. The 2014 NAP Committee ran the distance for this year’s workshop, providing a plethora of powerful education while staying on track…undefeated.