AgrAbility helps disabled farmers

A positive attitude and determined spirit has not only allowed farmer Lisa Phillips to continue to farm, it has helped her win the 2007 Easter Seals AgrAbility Award.

AgrAbility is a partnership between Easter Seals Delaware and Maryland’s Eastern Shore, the University of Delaware, University of Maryland, and the Centers for Independent Living in Maryland to help farmers with disabilities continue farming. The AgrAbility award is given each year by Easter Seals and the Delaware-Maryland AgrAbility Project (DMAP) to honor one farmer for their perseverance and tenacity in continuing to work on their farm despite their disability.

Phillips, of Whaleyville, Md., has overcome many disabilities, including arthritis, fibromyalgia and lupus, with the help of Assistive Technology (AT). AT is any device used to increase the functional capabilities of a person with a disability or special need. The accessibility experts with AgrAbility assessed Lisa’s needs and recommended accommodations that would help her to continue farming. At one point she was in so much pain she was bedridden, could not lift anything and could do little around the farm.

One of the recommendations was a John Deere Gator to help with loading and unloading materials, repairs and even putting up and taking down her electric fence. Now she is able to be independent again. “My Gator is a lifesaver,” she says. Lisa also uses Chick-mates, which helps her feed the chickens. “Assistive technology has given me more stamina; it has physically and emotionally helped me.”

Sally Van Schaik, Lisa’s AgrAbility case manager, says Lisa has maintained a positive attitude through all of her experiences.

“Lisa continues to do the work she needs to do every day to stay on her farm even when she is in a lot of pain. She always has a positive attitude and keeps forging ahead.”

Lisa has also gotten help from the farming community. She was thrilled when students in the Future Farmers of America program at the Sussex Central High School came to her farm to paint her chicken houses, a job that she was unable to do herself even though she knew it needed to be done. “I am so happy they did it because it is something I really wanted to do,” Lisa says. Van Schaik was an instrumental part in making the connection between Lisa and the FFA students and encouraging this project.

AT has changed Lisa’s life. She no longer depends on her husband to do all of the work. “Instead of saying I can’t, now I say I can.” Lisa says with determination.

Easter Seals offers a range of services, including outpatient rehabilitation therapy, early intervention services for children, day services for adults with physical disabilities and cognitive disabilities and assistive technology services to increase the functional capabilities of people with disabilities. For more information, call 800-677-3800 or visit www.de.easterseals.com.