



Against the Odds

► Ag adaptations give this Missouri woman a new purpose

BY CHERYL TEVIS¹

In December 2010, Carey Portell's life shattered when a drunk driver collided head-on with her vehicle on Route 66, a few miles from her St. James, Missouri, home. It was two days after Christmas, and the 35-year-old was on her way to teach a Zumba class, with two of her daughters, Olivia, 12 and Mackenzie, 10, in the back seat of her Ford Taurus. In the aftermath of the collision, her husband, Greg, and her father rushed to the scene. The damage to her vehicle was devastating, and once paramedics arrived, Carey's extrication was painstakingly slow. Greg had to leave when their daughters were taken by ambulance to the hospital. "The paramedic became my anchor," Carey says.

Carey was extricated over the front and back seats and carried over the top of the trunk of the vehicle. As the paramedic lifted her onto the gurney, he gripped her mangled right leg tightly.

The girls were treated and released from the hospital within a day. The driver of the truck that collided with them was pronounced dead at the scene.



Carey suffered a fractured pelvis, crushed right ankle and dislocated left foot. After undergoing two surgeries, she remembers waking up to hear her eight-year-old son saying, "Thank you for staying alive, Mom." She says, "When I looked down, my legs were in external fixators. I knew it was bad, but I had no clue how long or how hard my recovery would be."

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Carey fills the feeder on the back of her utility vehicle. "The UTV keeps me from being bumped over by cows, and from flying calf hooves," she says.

Climbing Out of the Depths

Confined to a wheelchair for almost two years, it was four years before Carey walked again without support. She had no feeling in her left foot during the first year. By the second year, shooting pains in her foot signaled the re-growth of nerves. Carey had 10 subsequent operations, fusing the joints in her ankles and bones in her pelvis.

The family received tremendous community support during Carey's recovery. "The post-surgery narcotics steal your memories," she says. "At times I had no idea what our children were going through. I'll never get that time back."

Carey pushed herself to learn to walk with walking casts. Next, she focused on walking without support. She recalls walking into a small grocery store. "Partway through, I had to sit in the aisle," she says. "After four years, I felt like I had climbed an enormous mountain, and then I plateaued. I still had severe, permanent lower body injuries, poor balance, and delicate lower legs. I could only take about 3,000 steps a day."

Carey still was wearing leg braces and lace-up boots 95% of the time, and she was unable to resume her former jobs as an x-ray technician, or photographer. Yet she needed to remain productive. Before the accident, she had raised Corriente cattle, a roping breed. "We sold them as soon as I got out of the hospital," she says. "I didn't want re-injure myself, but I loved working on the farm." The Portells purchased 40 head of Angus. Greg continued to work fulltime off-farm, and do evening chores. But the chores weren't going well for Carey. Getting in and out of the truck multiple times daily was painful, and took a toll on her energy.

"I had the mindset that I'd do the work the way I'd always done it," she says.

AgrAbility Opens a Door

Then, in 2014 Carey attended a University of Missouri conference for ag women, where she met Karen Funkenbusch, Missouri AgrAbility director. Funkenbusch contacted the state and encouraged Carey to apply to become a client. "We walked around the farm with her," Funkenbusch says. "We taught her how to avoid falls, protect herself if she falls, and how to work safer and smarter. We showed her how to make simple modifications, and use proper body mechanics and ergonomics. We consulted with her doctor."

Funkenbusch saw that Carey was determined to succeed. With help from Missouri AgrAbility and the department of vocational rehabilitation, Carey received funding to buy a Polaris Ranger UTV. "There's a cube feeder on the back of the bed, making feeding much easier," Carey says. "We installed a switch inside the cab to open the feeder door, so I just pull up beside the bunks and let 'er rip."

Carey's border collie keeps cattle away from the feed bunks during feeding. During calving season, she releases the lid of the feed bin on the UTV, and the cows gather to feed, allowing her to drive around them, and count cows and calves.

"The UTV keeps me from being bumped over by cows, and from flying calf hooves," she says. "I don't have to walk on ground with frozen hoof prints. It's the most essential piece of equipment I've received."

Other adaptations reduce Carey's fatigue, including anti-vibration gloves, and automatic pasture gates. Today the Portells have 120 head of Angus on their 1,000 acres. "The cows give me a purpose," she says.



▶ *The cows give me a purpose*

Sharing Her Story

Despite her shyness, Carey gradually began to share her experience, and today she's a motivational speaker who addresses the repercussions of drunk driving, and what it's like to get back to agriculture after a serious injury. She also has a blog, called Farm Girl Friday.

"In the spring and fall, I speak at a lot of schools," she says. From January to April, she talks with farm groups. "Farmers have a lot of pride, and often feel they'll lose their independence if they use assistive technology," she says. "But women in the audience nod their heads. Adaptations help keep farmers farming—they'll just do the work differently."

Although Carey has gained strength and mobility, she has end-stage traumatic arthritis. "I have moments when I feel 80 years old, but then I have the best days ever, and I stop and soak it all in," she says. "When I achieve things doctors said I'd never be able to do, that's my high. I have to avoid doing so much that I hurt myself, but enough to keep my joints loose. It requires patience."

She offers these words of advice to others:

- (1) **Acceptance.** "Accept where you're at now, and what's possible in the future," she says. "If you can't accept changes, the only thing you can hold onto is anger and you become bitter and miserable. You take it out on people you care about. Acceptance is the key to my happiness."
- (2) **Forgiveness.** "You must choose to forgive," she says. "I do not excuse the drunk driver. I have to forgive him for my own sake. There's no other way to heal."

Carey says that this life-changing event brought her closer to God. "Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in this world by mistake," she says. "I don't focus on what needs to be changed in the world as much as what needs to be changed in me. I think of all the lessons I've learned and the challenges I've gone through. There's no way I'd go through it again, but there's no way I'd take this experience back. I'm not the same person. It forced me to grow into the person I am today."



AgrAbility Can Help

“Everyone has something that happens to them in life,” Carey says. “By choosing the right attitude, and the right people around you, you can overcome it. If you love this lifestyle, AgrAbility and the department of vocational rehabilitation can help you.”

Studies estimate that between 634,000 and 2.23 million individuals in the U.S. ag population have a disability affecting their work or activities of daily living. The National AgrAbility Program was authorized in the 1990 Farm Bill. Currently there are 20 state projects that partner land-grant universities with nonprofit disability organizations.

AgrAbility doesn't provide direct funding or equipment. However, AgrAbility resources are readily available. The National AgrAbility Project's website www.agrability.org has a wealth of information, including downloadable resources, recorded webinars, and contact lists for the state AgrAbility projects. The Toolbox Assistive Technology Database www.agrability.org/toolbox contains more than 1,500 assistive technology solutions for farmers and others involved in outdoor work.



Cultivating Accessible Agriculture

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