

MISSOURI NEWS SCENE

Best dog for the job

Story and photos by
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MOST farm dogs specialize in digging holes in the yard and terrorizing the neighbor's chickens — but a PHARM dog? Well, that's another story.

Just south of Parnell in northwestern Missouri, a dog named Roy promises to have a dramatic impact on the life of his new owner, Dennis Schmitz. PHARM is part of Missouri AgrAbility's outreach to farmers with disabilities; it stands for Pets Helping Agriculture in Rural Missouri.

Schmitz, who farms with his wife, Carla, and five children, was injured in a PTO accident in 1999. With his neck fractured in four places, a broken arm, collarbone and ribs, as well as massive tissue damage, Schmitz fought through a long and painful rehabilitation. Today, he can do most anything any other farmer can do, but his strength and endurance are compromised. "I just wear

Key Points

- Program links special dogs and farmers with disabilities.
- Parnell farmer Dennis Schmitz received the first PHARM dog.
- PHARM dogs can enhance productivity and independence.

out a lot sooner than I'd like," Schmitz says.

And that's where Roy comes in. He's trained to help gather sheep and cattle on the Schmitz farm, saving Dennis time, steps and strain. The 3-year-old border collie is the first dog placed by the PHARM program. Virgil Miles of Tonganoxie, Kan., teamed up with another PHARM supporter, Bobby Miller of Plattsburg, to donate and train the dog.

"This won't be an overnight success," observes Miles, who has also worked with Schmitz on how to handle Roy. "It'll take some time and effort, but not too far down the road I think Dennis will ask himself how he ever got along without that dog."

PHARM is the brainchild of AgrAbility specialist Jackie

Allenbrand, who has been developing the concept since 2005. Her idea is that a dog can be another tool to help farmers with disabilities become more independent.

"A dog helping a farmer get his work done is nothing new," she explains. "But we wanted a program in which a dog would be trained for the specific needs of the farmer with a disability."

"In the case of Dennis, he needs a livestock-herding dog to save steps and energy. In the future, it might be a farmer who needs help with his balance, or someone who needs a dog that can fetch and carry certain items. We'll try to match the dog and its abilities with the farmer and his disabilities."

Possibilities are endless

PHARM's second trained dog is scheduled to go to a Wright County farmer after training is complete later this year.

Allenbrand, who's involved with AgrAbility through Midland Empire Resources for Independent Living, or MERIL, points out that the project is just getting started, but she hopes it will expand and help more Missouri farmers.

"I think it has a lot of promise," she says. "When you're around a truly well-trained dog you realize there's a lot of potential to help farmers with disabilities."

Schmitz, who often speaks on farm safety at University of Missouri Extension agricultural events, is also excited about the possibilities. "My wife and kids are a big help, but they can't always be around. I think Roy is going to be a huge help. He's going to help me be more productive, and I know there are a lot of farmers out there who could really benefit from this."

Learn more

Dogs now in the PHARM program have been donated. There is also a need for families to host puppies for a year before they go into training. For information on the PHARM dog project, visit the Missouri AgrAbility Web site at agrability.missouri.edu or the MERIL Web site at www.meril.org, or contact Jackie Allenbrand at jackiea@meril.org.

Parker writes from Parsons, Kan.

PHARM FAMILY: The Schmitz family (back row from left): Cody, Dennis, Carla, Collin and Clint. Front: Corby with Roy and Maggie with a canine future PHARM program member.



READY AND WILLING: Roy, a 3-year-old border collie, has been trained to help Parnell farmer Dennis Schmitz, who suffers from the effects of a PTO accident.

