

Help for vets who want to farm

Several agencies teaming up to make it happen

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MUSCATINE - Michael Simester, 37, a Muscatine native, enlisted in the Army in 1999 and later served in Iraq. He returned to the United States in 2003 and was stationed at Fort Carson, Colo., where he worked as a paralegal with a positive career in the Army lay before him.

Then came a motorcycle accident that left him with severe head, knee and leg injuries. He said it diminished his cognizant and organizational abilities.

"This more or less derailed my intention to be a paralegal where these abilities were necessary," Simester said. He was also eventually be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Article Photos



MICHAEL SIMESTER is seen here with his disability-adapted John Deere tractor made possible through efforts of Easter Seal of Iowa and the Veterans Administration among partners in the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Iowa. Simester said the tractor and compatible equipment make it possible for him to do many of the necessary farming practices that would otherwise be impossible to do as a result of his disabilities.

Returning to Muscatine in 2006 with his wife, Trish Simester, and children, Nicole, 15, and son, Ryan, 12, Simester said it happened "as if by accident" that he would later become the owner of the family's Serendipity Farm.

"We'd purchased a house in town, and as a result of my PTSD situation, kept having neighbor issues," he said.

The two-story house meant mobility issues as well.

"I was, at the same time, discovering I couldn't just sit and tear out the walls, that I didn't know how to not work and didn't want to become insane from boredom," Simester said.

He added he found - by accident - a 10-acre rural home site.

"This is when I contacted Easter Seals for an assessment of my situation and learned of its Rural Solutions Program serving Iowa farmers with disabilities" Simester said.

He also learned that the Veterans Administration offered grant opportunities for farming equipment.

Simester said his family originally began farming Serendipity Farms in 2010 with chickens in order to have their own eggs.

"Our market farm program has grown considerably since then," he said. "Today it's an everything-the-basic-Iowa-farmer-doesn't-grow farming operation."

Produce from the farm includes "a few melons" and this year, considerable kohlrabi, broccoli, squashes and gourds, tomatoes and eggs.

The produce is sold fresh from what he describes as "pretty much a cross between your grandmother's victory garden and the present day garden" and is marketed at local farmers' markets.

Simester is also enrolled in horticulture classes at Muscatine Community College.

Trish Simester is a medical assistant working on a degree at MCC in nursing.

Simester said he's grateful for the help of Easter Seals and the VA for making it possible for him to purchase his disability-adapted John Deere tractor, allowing him to start his farming program.

"It basically gave me a new lease on life," he said. "It had come to the point of being told my military career, something I'd planned on, was over, and not knowing what I was going to do or was able to do, and I was worrying about wanting to support my family.

"I highly recommend that veterans looking to go into farming or agriculture visit with a member of the Coalition about their respective interests and needs for their future planning," he said.

"While a paycheck is one thing, there's something that means much more, the ability for someone to do something they couldn't do before on their own. It's the feeling of a little more bit of independence and accomplishment."

- See more at: <http://www.farm-news.com/page/content.detail/id/509600/Help-for-vets-who-want-to-farm.html?nav=5005#sthash.0SenC0z5.dpuf>