Maine AgrAbility helps farmers with disabilities remain active and independent

By Elyse Kahl

"HI ALEX, I'm by the Cortlands," Naomi King says with a straight face into her walkie-talkie.

She puts her ear to the device waiting for a response.

The walkie-talkie clicks on.

"Ha-ha, very funny," King's assistant Alexandra Tomaso replies sarcastically.

King cracks a knowing smile. Saying "I'm by the Cortlands" on a 105-acre farm that's home to 48 varieties of apples—predominantly Cortlands and McIntoshes—is a running joke among the 24 employees of Pietree Orchard, the business she manages on the crest of Waterford Road in Sweden, Maine.

A few minutes later, Tomaso drives up in a golf cart, emerging from the early autumn mist shrouding the orchard that overlooks New Hampshire's White Mountains.

"That wasn't fair," Tomaso says to King, initiating a round of banter before the pair switch gears to talk business.

Tomaso started working for King in April 2013 at the suggestion of Maine AgrAbility, a USDA grant-funded state program that helps farmers with chronic health conditions and disabilities gain more control of their lives, continue to farm successfully and live independently. The Maine AgrAbility program is a nonprofit collaboration of University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Goodwill Industries of Northern New England and Alpha One.

Since receiving USDA funding in 2010, Maine AgrAbility has assisted more than 160 Maine farmers who have disabilities by offering services that range from answering agricultural questions, to suggesting ways to adapt tools or work sites, to referring farmers to other local support agencies.

King, a Unitarian Universalist minister and University of Southern Maine graduate, moved to Sweden in 2012 to be closer to her family after her rare muscular disorder started to advance.
In June 2012, King, who uses a wheelchair, took the management job at the family-owned business after her aunt retired. Naomi’s mother bought the orchard in 2008 to keep the business a working farm.

Naomi’s mother and father, authors Tabitha and Stephen King, are UMaine alumni.

“I’m the business monkey,” King says matter-of-factly, pointing at her name tag and the sign on the office door she shares with Tomaso. “It’s how I’m registered at the bank, it’s my official title. I monkey with the business.”

After working with farmers through her ministry, King, who had viewed herself as a vegetable gardener rather than a farmer, wanted to stay connected to the local food movement. She found the learning curve was steep when taking over a 75-year-old expanding farm.

Improvements to the business in the past few years have included opening a brick oven for baking bread and pizza sold in the retail store that’s open daily from June to Dec. 24; offering winter greens at area grocery stores and co-ops; making and selling maple syrup; and continuing to add crops.

“In 2008, what was growing here were apples and pumpkins. Today we grow 48 varieties of apples, 11 varieties of peaches, five varieties of Asian pears, four kinds of plums, nectarines, blueberries, strawberries and 100 kinds of vegetables, including potatoes and beans,” King says while petting her black cat McIntosh, or Mac, whom she jokingly refers to as “integrated pest control.”

By February 2013, the challenges of managing a successful, growing mid-size farm began to take a toll.

“I was at the point where I could not work at all here anymore,” King says. “I spent three months working by phone and going through the process of passing over the business after I had only been here about six months.”

King discovered a reference to the National AgrAbility Project online. When she learned there was a Maine program, King contacted Maine AgrAbility Project Coordinator Lani Carlson to determine if the program would apply to her.

Once King learned managing a farm counts as farming, she shared her needs to improve mobility on the farm, and to offer health and safety training to her employees.

One month later, Maine AgrAbility representatives were at Pietree to determine the needs of King and the business.

When someone contacts Maine AgrAbility, specialists conduct a farm assessment by observing work procedures and conditions, Carlson says. A report is then prepared that includes strengths, barriers and recommendations for improvement, as well as information on funding options, loan programs and support groups when needed.

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Naomi King, right, talks with Lani Carlson in Pickett Orchard’s store that sells produce and maple syrup. It also includes a brick oven for baking bread and pizza.

“We give suggestions and it’s up to the farmers to decide if they want to use it,” Carlson says of the free program. “We don’t just give them the report and walk away. We follow up and see if they need more help, and see how things have been implemented.”

After Pickett’s assessment, AgrAbility specialists made recommendations to King, such as hiring a personal assistant and getting a rugged outdoor wheelchair. Maine AgrAbility also referred King to an accessibility architect to update entrances and bathrooms, and build ramps.

King says the outdoor wheelchair with under-inflated tires designed to go over ridges instead of crush them, and a seat that rises 5 feet off the ground, allows her to check crop densities and harvest, if necessary.

“It lets me do more than I had imagined possible,” she says of the wheelchair that has a base painted John Deere green and yellow.

The program has also made the employees more aware of accessibility issues and they have applied it to other areas, such as planting with more space between rows to allow a wheelchair to get through.

In addition, the orchard now offers accommodations to visitors, such as poles that allow those sitting in chairs to pick from trees, and transportation to and from the pick-your-own strawberry, blueberry, apple and pumpkin fields.

King says the program allows her to remain active with the business and do more, despite the worsening of the disease.

“I was tremendously discouraged and convinced I couldn’t do anything related to the farm anymore,” King says. “So to be able to come to work six days a week is invaluable to me. It gives me a lot of purpose.”

The improvements spurred from AgrAbility recommendations have also helped Pickett continue to expand and evolve. Next year, King hopes to add more crops, including switchgrass — a renewable energy source — and a grain, either buckwheat or a lower-elevation quinoa.

MAINE AGRABILITY addresses a variety of conditions including arthritis, spinal cord injuries/paralysis, back impairments, amputations, brain injuries, visual and hearing impairments, diseases, cerebral palsy, respiratory impairments and head injuries.

The program provides consultative services and technical assistance, such as suggestions for modifying or adapting the agricultural operation, buildings, equipment, and/or tools on
a farm; works with rural agriculture, rehabilitation, and healthcare professionals to support Maine farmers with disabilities and their families; and shares information and resources statewide through networking events.

"AgrAbility is a big picture," Carlson says. "It's not just helping the farmers, it's educating people."

King is now a member of Maine AgrAbility's advisory council and helps direct education and outreach. She says being a member allows her to serve a program that has helped her enormously.

"I think occupational therapists are taught how to work with a wide variety of occupations, and yet, occupational therapists in this area that I've met didn't know anything about adaptation for agriculture," King says.

King has also taken it upon herself to spread the word about the value of Maine AgrAbility.

"Since finding out about the program, I've been passing that information along to my caregivers and medical providers who work with farmers in the area," King says.

"The wide range of services AgrAbility has set up — everything from (coping with) mental illness to mobility issues — makes it have broad applicability in this area."