

Combine Accident Changes Life Forever

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— About 5:30 p.m. on October 4, Jere Wingert climbed into his combine and began shelling corn in a field in front of his house. After a few minutes, the outside row of the combine header clogged with corn stalks.

As he had done many times before, the 30-year-old beef and hog farmer climbed out of the cab, stood on the platform above the auger and removed the obstruction. But this time he was wearing old shoes with smooth soles, and the platform was coated with corn dust.

He slipped, feet first, into the spinning 6-inch auger.

An auger pin pierced his left shoe, wrapping his leg around the auger one and a half times. His shoe was on top, where he could see it. He couldn't see his right leg, however, as it had slipped under the auger. "I thought it was off," he says.

In minutes, his life was changed. And although Wingert lost part of his left leg in the accident, he said he also gained something — a thankfulness in this holiday season for the kindness and generosity of his neighbors. And especially, an appreciation for the sharp ears of his 3 1/4-year-old son, Nicholas.

After falling into the auger, Wingert braced himself with his arms against the frame of the combine to keep from being pulled in farther and shouted for help. He called for his wife, his father, a neighbor. No one came.

His wife, Carol, was upstairs in the farmhouse running bath water for Nicholas.

"Mommy, I hear a kitty-cat," Nicholas said.

Carol turned off the water and listened. When she realized it was her husband calling, she wrapped Nicholas in a bathrobe and ran outside.

"I was getting to the end," Wingert says now. "It wasn't even like

a regular holler."

Following her husband's instructions, Carol pulled the lever to disengage the auger. Then she ran back to the house to call 911.

Wingert was in the combine up to his waist; Carol thought both of his legs were severed. "I told the dispatcher that he was conscious, but I wasn't sure for how long."

Paramedics tried to free Wingert by turning the auger backwards with a wrench, but it caused him too much pain. They also tried the JAWS rescue tool, but its vibrations were intolerable.

"I kept thinking, 'They don't know how to get him out of there,'" Carol said.

Several neighboring farmers had also arrived on the scene. A local machinery repairman, Jerry Miller, was summoned to bring his propane torch to cut the auger.

"If it wasn't for him, I don't know where I'd be at this point," Wingert said, sitting on a couch in his family room seven weeks after the accident.

The farmers wanted to lift the auger out as soon as both ends were cut, but paramedics insisted on placing a tourniquet around Wingert's left thigh first.

"What one didn't understand the other one did," Carol said of the joint rescue.

Wingert remembers seeing



Nicholas is proud of the fact that he was the first to hear his father calling for help. Whenever the story of his father's accident is told, Nicholas makes sure his part of the drama is included. "I thought it was a lost little pussy cat," he says.



Nicholas loves the baby pigs.



Carol, Nicholas and Jere Wingert are thankful this holiday season that Jere's life was spared, although he lost his left leg in a combine accident.



One of Nicholas's favorite activities is playing farm with his father.

about five farmers at each end of the auger. Others supported his body as the auger was raised, his leg still wrapped around it.

Paramedics told Carol the right leg was all right, but gave her no assurances for the left leg, she recalled.

The rescue operation took only 24 minutes; Wingert estimates he was in the combine between five and 10 minutes before Nicholas heard him.

A medical helicopter airlifted the injured farmer to the Shock Trauma Unit of the University of Maryland Hospital in Baltimore,

where he lost consciousness. He had been "very much with it," until then, Carol said.

Several hours later, despite doctors' attempts to save it, Wingert's left leg was amputated at mid-thigh. "There really was no choice," Carol said. "It was his life or his leg."

After 20 units of blood and four further operations, Wingert was transferred to Mechanicsburg Rehabilitation Hospital October 22. There, he progressed from a wheelchair to a walker to crutches and was discharged November 5.

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