

Live For The Moment

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff

OLEY (Berks Co.) — "Yesterday's history. What's today, what's tomorrow that's what's important," Brandon Wagner said.

It's this philosophy that helps the 20-year-old triumph over being paralyzed from the waist down. It's this attitude that enables him to face the future with faith instead of emotionally crippling "what ifs."

Strong, determined, and inspiring are words that friends and acquaintances use again and again to describe Brandon.

A little more than two years ago, Brandon's life was dramatically changed as he drove off in his pickup truck to pick up his girlfriend. Less than one mile from home, his truck spun around on a narrow, twisting road, and plunged down a 26-foot embankment.

The impact threw him from his truck and Brandon lay on the frigid ground for almost two hours before his father and a neighbor found him.

"I was conscious. I knew my back, arm, and clavicle were broken. My head was bleeding," he said.

He also realized that he couldn't feel his legs. That, he knew, was a bad sign. But he refused to allow himself think that he might be paralyzed.

He lay in the cold ground, willing rescue to come.

His dad found him and a neighbor called Medivac. That was Feb. 7, 1998.

A CATSCAN soon confirmed that Brandon's diagnosis of his injuries were correct. The most serious was the severed spinal cord at T 11 and 12.

Brandon didn't waste any time. With fierce determination

he refused to think about not walking again. Although his arms were not paralyzed, he couldn't use either of them because of broken bones.

When medical personell attempted to insert a pin and screw in his arm, the drill broke.

"They said my bones are so hard — the first time ever that broke the drill — I guess it's from drinking all that milk," Brandon said.

After eight days, they sent him home from the hospital in what they referred to as a clam shell brace. Six weeks later his arms had healed and Brandon began physical therapy.

"Right away my arms were strong enough to move myself," he said. Brandon was still a senior in high school. Fortunately, he had all the credits except one in history that he needed to graduate, and he quickly fulfilled that by studying at home. Brandon had been studying diesel mechanics at vo-tech.

His vo-tech, FFA adviser, and friends visited almost every day. Neighbors helped his mom with the exercise therapy required.

Brandon wheeled himself across the stage to receive his diploma while his classmates applauded.

"The community, my church, and friends, vo-tech and ag teachers really stood by me. They helped a lot," Brandon said. Brandon was active in 4-H and Oley Valley FFA, where he held terms as president and other offices.

Brandon soon had a Jeep Cherokee fitted with hand controls to drive. With ease, he can pull himself into the driver's seat, fold his wheelchair, and heave it inside the vehicle.

Brandon always intended to farm. He wasn't about to let an injury, even if permanent, stop

him from helping with 700 acres and 180 milking cows. Six months after the accident, he and his family attended Ag Progress Days. They were thrilled to discover the Agrability booth and a Ventrack, a special vehicle to get around.

"It was the best thing I saw at Ag Progress," Brandon said. The motorized Ventrack allows him to wheel his wheelchair onto it and take off anywhere around the farm.

A therapist, engineer, and a member of Agrability, an organization that helps handicapped farmers continue to farm, came to the farm and evaluated Brandon's needs and how things needed to be set up to enable him to work on the farm. They showed him pictures of other, older farmers with machinery adaptations.

According to Brandon, Agrability researches the modifications needed and the Office and Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) funds the required modifications.

Brandon was thrilled, but impatient to wait until adaptations were made. With a friend, he made many of the changes himself — and many of them turned out better than they would have if done otherwise.

Some of the modifications include a stationery lift to pull to the tractor to enable him to get on — but mostly I just climb up with my arms, he said.

Brandon does almost all the field work on the 700 acres, from disking to mowing alfalfa, hay, and round baling.

At first his mom worried about him be alone in the fields. "But I'm getting over it, she said. "He has a cell phone with him in case he needs help."

He also does the mechanical work on the tractors and equipment. He maneuvers himself into a specially designed wheelchair that raises him to a standing position to reach heights. He lowers himself onto a creeper for going beneath the equipment.

Some days Brandon has a lot of pain. "But I don't take pain medication. I just endure it," he said.

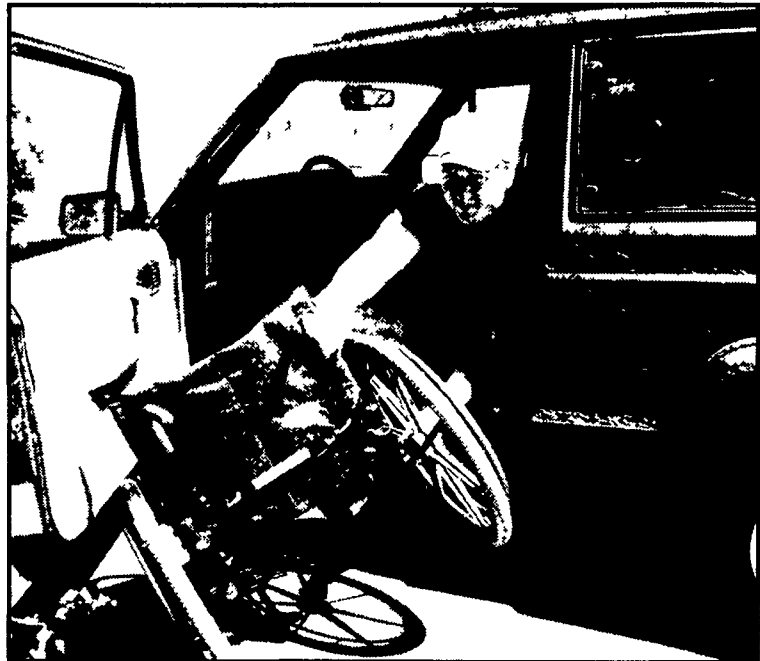
He takes business classes at Reading Area Community College. Although he had an interest in taking business courses before the accident, he had been leaning toward diesel mechanics.

The one thing he can't do is milk the cows. If the family had a different set up, modifications could possibly be made, but at this time, he's busy with field work and mechanical duties.

Last year's drought was the worst that Brandon's dad ever remembers in his lifetime. A sparse harvest and dwindling milk prices are discouraging.



Brandon Wagner has always been described as good looking, great personality, strong, and determined. Now "inspiring" has been added to the description. Two years ago, Brandon was paralyzed from the waist down, but he hasn't left that stop him from farming, going to college, and accomplishing many other activities that 20-year-olds like to do. Notice the Ventrack that enables him zip around the farm.



Wheels are important to Brandon. His Jeep Cherokee has been outfitted with hand controls and allows him to quickly heave the collapsed wheel chair into the Jeep.

Brandon said, "If other people would work as hard as farmers, this world would be a different place."

As for himself, he said, "I'm not giving up. I can do anything I want to do. I don't waste time thinking about what I could be doing if this hadn't happened, but I figure out how I'm going to do it."

His mom said, "Brandon

doesn't let himself get down. He really has determination."

The Wagners were a former Berks County Farm Family. Brandon's parents Rodger and Dorothy will celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary on Sunday. They have four adult children. Another son, Dean, also works full time on the farm.

They are involved in the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and at the St. John's UCC.



Although he has a stationary lift, Brandon finds it quicker to use his arms to pull himself from the wheelchair into the tractor seat. He does much of the crop farming of the family's 700 acres and the mechanical work on the equipment.

