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Farmer touts safety mantra years after close call

By Brad Guse and Stephanie Leonard

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Brad Guse and his wife Bonnie of Arpin, Wis., are advocates for farm safety, a cause shaped by his own experience in 1985.

Photo courtesy Marshfield Clinic Health System

Brad Guse, a hobby farmer and ag lender in rural Arpin, Wisconsin, recently shared his own injury experience with the Telling the Story Project: a machinery entanglement in 1985 that left him on crutches for months and impacted his decades-long passion for farm safety.

Here is his story:



It seems many of us start a farm accident story — or any accident story, for that matter — with the statement “it all happened so fast.”

But that was exactly the thought that hit me as I lay on the grass, away from the tractor, numb from the hip down in my right leg, feeling my way down to my toes, not looking, hoping that it all was still there.

Like many farm accidents, it all seems to start when we are in a hurry. My story is no different.

In the spring of the year when first-crop hay is being made, time is of the essence. In my case, I was working in Pierce County, Wisconsin, for a farmer who had land about two miles from the main farm. Running chopper boxes that distance meant you were always behind, and the chopper was always waiting for you.

With the hay drying fast, and to keep the silo blower running smooth while filling the upright silo, we had a water hose we turned on at the blower to mix with the feed. For this particular load, I pulled up to the blower, crawled from the tractor to the blower tractor and ramped up the rpms, then went back to my wagon tractor and started the PTO to unload the wagon.

As I worked the beaters to get the haylage flowing at the right pace, I realized I had forgotten to turn the water on. So once the unloading was running smooth, I walked around my tractor to turn the water on.

Of course the hydrant was on the other side of the blower, so I reached for it, putting my foot on the edge of the blower to balance myself.

BAM.

I was on my back on the ground with my leg in the blower. It happened so fast. My foot slipped, and in I went. There I was, laying on my back, feeling the whirl-a-feed pan hitting the back of my foot — trying to jam it into the main blower — and feeling the main blower on the end of my foot.

I felt it catch the sole of my work boot and rip it off, sending it up the 80-foot silo. I thought to myself there is no way I can reach the emergency shut off, so I decided I had to grab my leg and pull it out, which I did.

Every time I have been really hurt badly, the initial feeling is numbness. I felt that from the hip down as I got up and reached to shut off the PTOs on the tractor and crawled out onto the lawn to figure out how badly I was hurt. I could not bring myself to look down, because I was afraid of what I would see.

I'd heard stories in the military about landmine victims still feeling like they had limbs, even though they were gone, so I resolved to feel my way down my leg, to determine how badly I was hurt.

I was so relieved to feel my whole leg and all my toes, but knew I was hurt.

That's when the farm owner drove in and saw me lying there.

Immediately, we rushed to the hospital to determine the extent of the damage. Fortunately, I had only a small crack in my shin bone, but from the knee down, my leg looked like a nylon full of goose eggs. The tendons were all stretched and it took me several months to heal.

To this day, every time I hear a silo blower kick in, my right leg tingles with the memory.

One of the folks I have met while working with the National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield, Wisconsin, told me a phrase that sticks with me: "two minutes for safety." Had I taken just a couple more seconds and walked around the blower instead of reaching across, I would not have been a part of that farm accident.

Being in a hurry is no excuse for an unsafe act. In fact, we all need to take just those two little minutes before every activity to think about safety. It may prevent a serious injury, or may even save a life.

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Tell a story, save a life