



The ACCIDENTAL FARMER

After a paralyzing diving accident, an entrepreneur and visionary finds the divine plan for his life in operating an organic farm.

BY JOHN CHRISTENSEN
PHOTOS BY LEITA COWART

Andy Byrd was face down at the bottom of a lake and about to run out of oxygen. He'd hit a rope on his dive, his neck was broken, he was in terrible pain and he was going to drown.

And, just as he'd heard it happens, his life rolled past his mind's eye – things he'd done, things he shouldn't have done, things he'd left undone. More than anything, he wished he could tell his mama and daddy that he loved them.

"But then a peaceful feeling came over me," he recalls. "I saw a light, and the pain kind of went away, and I felt God telling me, 'Hey, everything's gonna be all right. It's gonna be different, but I've got a plan for you.'" »

His brother, Tony, pulled him from the lake and 28 years later, he's in a shed on Whippoorwill Hollow Farm, a mile from the only stoplight in Walnut Grove, Ga. He is sitting in a knobby-tired, four-wheel-drive wheelchair with camouflaged fenders and armrests wrapped with duct tape that he calls "redneck upholstery."

Around him is the cheerful clutter of a working farm: a stainless steel sink; a wire basket of brown eggs; a stack of white plastic pails; sacks of grits; baskets hanging from the center beam; a computer and printer; a scale; an air conditioner; a wood-burning stove. A faded American flag hangs by the open door with a bridle and a horseshoe, and through it ambles a tail-wagging mongrel named Dixie.

This is part of the plan. So, too, is the 100-foot, plastic-covered hoophouse on the knoll above the shed; the coops of chickens, turkeys and quail; the black goat and her frisky kids; two contemplative reddish-brown horses; a free-standing truck body filled with bags of feed; piles of black drip-irrigation hose; and long, sculpted rows of rich, dark soil pushing leafy green stalks into balmy, mid-winter sunshine.

"We bought this place 10 years ago to build a house," says Andy's wife, Hilda, grinning, "but we became organic farmers instead."

The Byrds sell their produce to area restaurants and at two farmer's markets in Atlanta, an hour to the west. But they also mentor would-be organic produce growers and farmers with disabilities; host an annual event called Field of Greens that features some of the best chefs in the area; entertain culinary classes from local colleges; lecture at seminars around the country; and give tours to school children, civic groups, garden clubs and anyone else who happens by.

Neatly bound in a white vinyl notebook on a table are colorful renderings of elements yet to be added to the farm – a general store and café, amphitheater, education center, cemetery with a chapel and walking trails with meditation areas. (*See sidebar.*)

Previous Page: Former Shepherd Center patient Andy Byrd never planned on becoming a farmer, but now feels it's his purpose in life. Whippoorwill Hollow Farm, which he operates with his wife Hilda, was certified organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2002.





“We want to make this farm a destination,” says Andy, whose sleepy eyes and mild country ways mask a fertile mind and a fierce drive that have led others to call him a visionary and serial entrepreneur.

His parents owned and operated the town’s general store, a place where you could get everything from underwear to pipe fittings to groceries to livestock feed. When not working in the store, Andy kayaked, hiked, went caving and rock climbing, and competed in water-skiing tournaments.

“Things came easy to me,” he says.

After two years at a technical college, he entered an engineering program at General Motors. But his spinal cord injury put an end to that career.

“I went through a year of wondering, ‘Why me?’ My first wife didn’t accept me being hurt, so we got a divorce,” he says. “But then I realized I’ve got to do something. I just can’t sit here in this house or I’ll rot.”

It was about that time that he got a visit from Hilda, whom he’d known since childhood. “He said if he was gonna keep up with me,

he was gonna have to get on the ball,” Hilda recalls. “I was playing softball and everything.”

“We have literally been together just about 24/7 since,” Andy adds.

His first project was to rip out the walls of an old house and open a video store. In the process, he created a template for all his subsequent projects: He provided the vision, and others provided the labor.

“If you look at things as how I can’t do it,” Andy says, “it’s not possible. But if it’s, ‘HOW am I gonna do it?’, you don’t have any barriers there. That’s kind of the way I look at things. If there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“He’s just amazing,” Hilda says with a chuckle. “We started with videos, and then he says, ‘This place has a kitchen. I think we can do take-out pizza,’ so we did that. And then he says, ‘I think we can do sub sandwiches.’ And we were ahead of our time because now there’s Domino’s, and the Subway is where Andy’s store was.”

His other occupations over the years have included dispatcher for the fire department, town councilman and mayor pro tem. He owned a grading and septic system installation business. From his wheelchair, he taught the workers to operate bulldozers and backhoes. Andy even built a strip mall with a beauty salon so unique it was featured in a design magazine.

Above Left: Andy and Hilda Byrd were childhood friends in Walnut Grove, Ga., and married later in life. They operate Whippoorwill Hollow Farm and sell their organically grown produce to restaurants and in two Atlanta-area farmers’ markets. **Above Right:** Whippoorwill Hollow Farm in Walnut Grove, Ga., is home to a variety of farm animals and produces organic fruits and vegetables, as well as eggs. It is certified organic by the USDA.



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— Andy Byrd

Although his initial treatment and rehab for the accident that left him a C-6 quadriplegic were at Emory University Hospital, Andy came to Shepherd Center for follow-up rehab in 1982.

“I've always been one to reach for the stars,” he says, “and at Shepherd they had this outlook about your well-being. They were going to put you back into the community. You know, 'What's next? How can we help you do what you have to do next?'”

Shepherd Center's associate medical director, Dr. Brock Bowman, is Andy's physician now, and he marvels at Andy's work routine.

“He's the only C-6 quad I know of who does anything remotely close to what he does,” says Dr. Bowman, who has visited Andy's farm. “A lot of people never get back into the workplace with that injury. Add to that the fact that he's in an agricultural setting, around a lot of dirt and uneven surfaces. I think it's remarkable.”


But it's also possible, Andy discovered, to be too busy. In 1994, overworked and stressed by the death of his father, who was also his good friend and business partner, he lost 60 pounds. His doctor told him, “If we don't figure this thing out, you're not going to be here long.”

So, Andy threw away his medicine, got out of politics and sold some of his businesses, and Hilda quit her job at a nursing home.

“I was doing too much,” he says. “I thought I was Superman.”

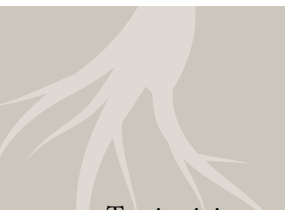
They bought 74 overgrown acres and discovered blueberry bushes, muscadines, apples and pears on the property. Ever the entrepreneur, Andy put a “Pick Your Own” sign out front. “People asked if we'd fertilized the blueberries, and we said no,” Andy says. “Then they asked what else we grew.”





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Turning it into an organic farm was the obvious solution, and in 2002 Whippoorwill Hollow Farm was certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Now, tours of the property include lectures on organic farming, stewardship of the land and water conservation. They also include a glimpse of an idea that Andy hopes will catch on in cities and towns – parking lot farms for people with disabilities.

“There’s a future in organic farming, not just here, but in a city,” Andy says. “You can take an organic farm to a city, and someone in a wheelchair can grow vegetables on raised beds. And they can grow organic flowers, which are becoming a big, big thing because so many people are sensitive to chemicals.

“People who come to these markets are fantastic and so appreciative of what you’ve done. They’re willing to pay for organic foods, and disabled workers could get satisfaction from what they’ve done. It’s not healthy for anyone with a disability or illness to sit at home and not have something to do.”

But the trajectory of the Byrds’ dreams has not been without challenges. Andy has twice had surgery for complications from his injury, and Hilda has had surgery five times for cancer. Their insurance com-

pany stopped doing business in Georgia, and they paid for chemotherapy and Andy’s \$19,000 wheelchair out of their own pocket.

Last summer, their van and Andy’s other chair were destroyed in a fire. They have been unable to replace either and are using a borrowed van.

“We’re over her challenges, but we’re not over the bills,” Andy says. “We’re hoping we’re going to be able to get them this year, and we’re hoping maybe we can get some help there.”

“We’ve had a few obstacles the last few years,” Hilda says, “so we know what other people are going through. But it takes more than that. We’re going to keep going.”

Andy adds: “Our job is to inspire people – whether it’s farming or inspiring engineers to make things more accessible or create new tools.

“People come to me and say, ‘Andy, you’re such an inspiration’ to a cousin or a friend or someone. And they’re thinking, ‘If he can do it, I know I can do it.’ Up to this day, I still have people tell me that, so I feel that’s what God left me on this earth for.”

For more information on the Byrds’ farm, visit www.whippoorwillhollowfarm.com.