

Preferred Worker Program

Making the most of a bad situation

By Aaron Corvin

Chris Matthews will tell you he's lucky to be alive.

"Most everybody dies in a situation like that," he said, recalling a 2012 accident in which a potato-harvesting machine crushed and scorched his left arm.

Under different circumstances, Matthews, 34, might still be struggling with how to make a living in the shadow of his disability, facing few – if any – prospects for re-entering the labor market, and staring at the possibility of going on permanent social assistance. After all, some employers attach a stigma to workers who, though they have a strong desire to return to work, have permanent disabilities from on-the-job injuries.

Yet a critical springboard helped Matthews, a third-generation farmer, make the jump to a new career in accounting: the Preferred Worker Program. Overseen by the Oregon Workers' Compensation

Division, the program encourages re-employment of qualified Oregon workers who have permanent disabilities from on-the-job injuries and who are unable to return to their regular work because of those injuries. The program focuses on small- to medium-size businesses.

Funded by worker and employer contributions to the Workers' Benefit Fund, the program equips injured workers with the tools to return to safe, productive work and provides employers with financial incentives to bring such workers on board.

Since 2012, the program has served an average 1,177 newly eligible workers per year. They include Matthews, who's now enjoying success as an accounting technician for Simpson and Roesener LLP, an accounting firm in downtown Tillamook.

"These are people who were working; they were being productive," said Brian Nease, worksite modification consultant for the Workers' Compensation Division, "and they have a desire to be productive again."

Nease added, "We're here to help get them moving forward."

Making a comeback

When the machine got hold of him, its pull terrifying in its power, Matthews' thoughts turned to his wife and child.

He'd never see their faces again, hug them tight. He was going to die.

Moments before, he was just doing his job as a big-rig mechanic for a potato-processing plant in Klamath County. Before that job, he'd farmed for his family for 10 seasons. The stuff was in his blood. As a mechanic, he was making good money.

Then he went to clear some debris from the clogged potato harvester, hooked up to a 400-horsepower tractor, its energy still running loose.

"Quite honestly," Matthews said, "I screwed up, and I did not follow lockout-tagout."

The harvester's countercyclical rollers grabbed the Velcro wrist strap on the glove of Matthews' left hand and yanked him in.

His savior was his 6-foot-4-inch, 275-pound frame. Somehow, he gained leverage. He mustered everything he had and resisted. He pulled. He got away, his arm ruined, his chest bruised.

That was the fall of 2012 when Matthews held onto his life. To be sure, he'd never be the same person again. The nightmares generated by his nerve-jangling accident were never far away.

But he started healing, physically and mentally.

He became more humble, more introspective, more attuned to the unpredictability of life.

He began looking for a new way to make a living.



Chris Matthews' left arm was crushed and severely burned in a 2012 accident involving a potato-harvesting machine. It is a permanent disability that significantly limits his left arm's range of motion.



**Learn more about the Preferred Worker Program and
get contact information: pwp.oregon.gov**

A new path

The seeds to grow a new career were there.

Matthews already had a degree in agribusiness from the University of Nevada. He'd tried sales once. He could work with numbers. And his father-in-law, Steve Simpson, was a managing partner of the accounting firm Simpson and Roesener LLP.

But Matthews needed the beginning of a foundation before approaching Simpson. So, he took and passed a class offered by H&R Block, the tax preparation company.

Then, he talked to Simpson about a job.

The transition would be bumpy. Matthews would have to embrace change, mistakes, corrections, training, and close supervision. For Simpson, the situation posed the additional costs and risks to his small firm of taking on an employee who did not have an accounting degree.

It's not something he'd typically do, Simpson said, given that new employees "need that degree in accounting for a basis for what we do."

So, Simpson reached out to the Preferred Worker Program, which conducted an assessment of Matthews' eligibility and of his permanent work restrictions.

Things started coming together.

The program kicked in the funds to help pay for computer and phone equipment, and worksite modifications tailored to Matthews, who cannot repetitively use his left arm. The changes included an adjustable keyboard, allowing Matthews to perform data entry in a neutral hand position, and an ergonomic chair to keep his arms supported.

The program also paid to relocate Matthews to Tillamook and for the new clothes he needed in going from dusty farmhand to tie-wearing number-cruncher.

The Preferred Worker Program paid for worksite modifications, including an adjustable keyboard and ergonomic chair, to help Matthews make the transition from farmer to accounting technician. Steve Simpson, a managing partner of the accounting firm Simpson and Roesener LLP, contacted the Preferred Worker Program to lower the costs of hiring Matthews.





Before Matthews approached his father-in-law, Steve Simpson, about a job at Simpson's accounting firm, he took and passed a class offered by H&R Block, the tax preparation company. Matthews recently earned a bachelor's degree in accounting from Colorado Technical University.



“The program has resulted in a huge, positive impact, not only for (Matthews) but for his family and society.”

— Steve Simpson, a managing partner
of Simpson and Roesener LLP

All of this significantly lowered the cost to Simpson and Roesener LLP of hiring Matthews. The program's other benefits to the accounting firm included reimbursement of half of Matthews' gross wages for six months.

“We were able to cut that essentially in half for the first six months while Chris became a productive employee,” Nease said.

Simpson said the program has resulted in “a huge, positive impact, not only for (Matthews) but for his family and society.”

Matthews is moving forward. He recently earned a bachelor's degree in accounting from Colorado Technical University. He's got his sights set on becoming a full-fledged certified public accountant. He and his wife now have two children.

On a recent sunny, windswept morning in Tillamook, Matthews spoke with no small amount of amazement about his life so far. He exuded gratefulness. “I'm really happy with where I'm at,” he said.

- A preferred worker is a person who has work skills, work experience, and a desire to return to work after an on-the-job injury.
- Employers are eligible to use the Preferred Worker Program if they're hiring a preferred worker for an Oregon job.
- Benefits to employers of the Preferred Worker Program include an exemption from paying workers' compensation insurance premiums or premium assessments on a preferred worker for three years.