



Farming in Kittson County

Agriculture

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Schuster to fellow farmers: Safety is key, get ample rest

By Anna Jauhola

The day before a farming accident dramatically changed Brad Schuster's life, he gave his neighbor the same advice he should have followed on Oct. 25, 2018.

"I said, 'Make sure you're safe. If you're getting tired, get rest,'" Schuster said during an interview at his rural Drayton home recently. "But you have to follow your own advice. And I didn't do it."

Schuster, 61, could see the end of his 2018 sugar beet harvest, but the weather was not cooperating.

"I hadn't slept very well over the last few days. I was worrying about the weather," he said. "I was very tired and kind of mad."

His patience wearing thin with only 60 acres left to harvest, Schuster headed out to check on the lifter his dad was operating just north of the farmyard.

The harvester was stopped and while inspecting the machine, Schuster noticed a hydraulic leak.

"I went back where the leak was and I went across the back side of the digger," he said. "I could have just went around the other side and looked where it was leaking, but I needed it to run, too."

Schuster was in a rush. That, mixed with low patience, lack of sleep and hyper-focus on just solving the problem, led to the split-second action that took his right leg.

He climbed up on the beet harvester and knelt on the yellow drive-shaft rather than the green braces. His dad told him not to get on the digger, but Schuster waved away the pleas and said to turn on the machine.

"In my mind, I didn't pay attention that it was yellow. In my mind, I was just on a brace. ... I was kind of anxious. I saw trucks coming so we needed to get going," Schuster said. "Dad just barely touched the switch. I



BRAD SCHUSTER, OF DRAYTON, N.D., explains how he was sucked into the sugar beet harvester pictured.

(Enterprise Photo by Anna Jauhola)

was lucky it spun the one way that made me go backward rather than head first."

It happened in an instant.

Fortunately, his dad did not fully engage the switch and the machine stopped. Schuster's left foot was caught in the end of one grabroll and the right leg was ground right up to the knee.

"And I'm sitting there thinking, 'What in the world?'" Schuster said. "This happened in a second. My dad came back hysterical. He said, 'What have I done?' and I said, 'Dad, it's not your fault. I told you turn it on.'"

Whether it was shock or just the reality of the situation, Schuster is unsure, but he was extremely calm and remembers everything from the accident through the rescue and into the ambulance.

He spent the next 25 days in Altru Hospital in Grand Forks during which he had seven surgeries.

They cut muscle from his stomach and back, and took skin from his thighs to attempt to make the right leg work and to recreate his left foot. The surgical team was able to save his left foot, but after the sixth surgery his right leg began to fail.

"There was a great team of amazing people there when I came in," Schuster said.

By the time his doctor came in and said the team could perform a few more surgeries to save the right leg, Schuster and his wife, Karen, had already made the decision to amputate.

"I thought, 'I'm getting tired of getting cut. I'm tired of having things harvested off me,'" he said. "I told him I thought it was the right thing to do."

"We had both prayed about it. We were both so at peace with the decision," Karen said.

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