



# Dennis Atkins

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Dennis recently broke the 70,000-mile mark in a near-lifetime of running. At 56, he's been running since 1978. He's finished 15 marathons, numerous half marathons and has raised over \$70,000 for people with disabilities. He doesn't allow himself any excuses, because, well, he doesn't think he has any.

A retired branch claims manager for American Family Insurance, Atkins knows just where he's headed, even if he can't see to get there.

Atkins is blind. Diagnosed in July of 1979 with retinitis pigmentosa, Atkins can now see only shadows in certain light conditions. What he can see—or rather what he said God allows him to see—is enough. “The Good Lord allows me to see the black expansion joints in the street and I follow those through the subdivision,” he said.

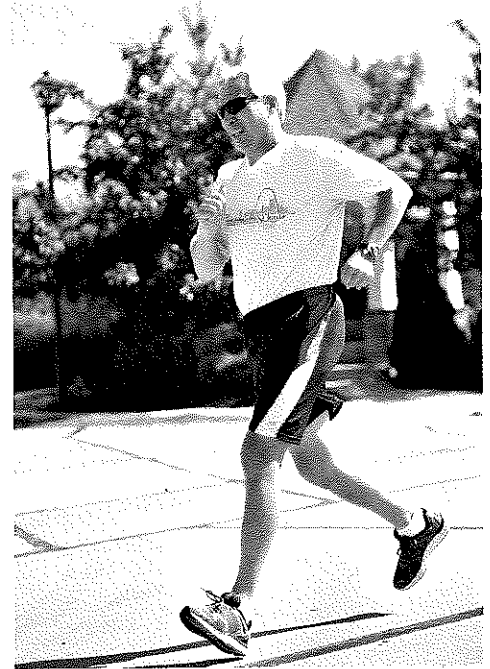
The rest of the time, he just feels his way, averaging eight or nine miles a day. “I can't see anything so I just feel the cracks in the street with my legs, and where the curb meets the street and the crest of the street or slight incline in the height of the street,” he said. “I can feel dips in the streets at intersections. I

get lost at times. Then I just feel the raised numbers and letters on the mailboxes until I find my way home.”

A hereditary eye disease, retinitis pigmentosa is a progressive retinal condition that leads to incurable blindness. Starting with night blindness, the disease first destroyed his peripheral vision and finally his central vision. One of Atkins's sisters has the disease. The other does not.

In 1978, he was playing on a competitive softball team when he began to lose the ball during night games. “I just thought I needed glasses,” Atkins said. But doctors had another explanation. They told him he would be blind in two years. Ever the optimist, Atkins said, “It's been a huge blessing to me that I ended up getting 34 years in with American Family Insurance.” He managed American Family offices in Wichita, Kansas and St. Louis, Missouri during that time.

A sister disease to macular degeneration, retinitis pigmentosa slowly kills the retinal and photosensory cells. “There is no cure. They are working on transplanting photosensory cells and with micro chips.” Atkins said. “You are



Story by Robin Seaton Jefferson  
Photo by Michael Schlueter

born with a certain amount of photosensory cells. They don't reproduce. It is one of the few areas in the body that doesn't reproduce.” Atkins had to give up driving in 1998. He had cataracts removed at 39 and 41 years of age.

“It's pretty scary,” Atkins said. “I've gone through three phases. A lot of people with disabilities go through these.”

He said the first phase is denial. “My first thought was, ‘They're wrong. I'm not going to go blind.’”

Then as the years past and his vision deteriorated, he started to count what blessings he had left. “I was ok. I could still drive and run. I told a few friends, my parents, and my wife and step son. But I was still hopeful. I didn't want to be different or treated differently.”

But the denial soon abated. And it was in 1998, that Atkins hit bottom. “That was my lowest period. I lost the freedom of driving. It was the

## People You Should Know



lowest of lows. I felt like it was all over. I said, 'Oh Lord, what am I going to do?'"

Atkins said he spent about a year and a half in the second phase of his disability. Then he realized he still wanted to enjoy his life and went on to the third phase. "I said, 'Yes, I have this disease, but I'm going to figure out a way to do everything I want to do anyway. If I fall down or hit a parked car, I will pick myself up and go on.'"

"A very strong faith in God has always propelled me throughout my life," he said. "And I was blessed to be surrounded by a large, very positive nucleus of friends and family."

So he ran on, through the years, through the blindness and through the fear. "I go out and run especially when I'm afraid or scared. It gives me a high. I feel strong."

It was July 15, 1978, when Atkins started keeping track of the miles he ran on his personal calendar. He said he averages about 2,100 miles per year. And he loves it more than ever.

"I run because I like the birds. I like the fresh air. I can feel the sun. I love running when it's snowing. I love running when it's raining. One of the biggest issues with anybody with a disability or a person getting older is that they have this fear that they can no longer do something but I've learned not to give in to my fears."

He said he runs because it is something he can do well. Although he may be limited in driving or reading books or even in focusing on television, (he said he attempts this for Chiefs or Rams games) Atkins runs for fun. He earned his first degree from Missouri Western

in 1977. But he went on to complete his MBA and doctorate in business administration by correspondence, while legally blind.

Mostly, Atkins said he's thankful for the voice he still has to share with others with disabilities, or those who have lost loved ones or even their jobs. "We all have huge hurdles to overcome. I meet people all the time who have it a lot worse than me. I meet people with their legs amputated or those who have lost both vision and hearing."

Atkins offers motivational presentations tailored to the specific needs of the group he is addressing. His talks help others by providing insight to them on how to set goals and overcome fears and life's challenges. His audiences are business people, church members, service organizations and disability and professional groups.

He currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Delta Center for Independent Living and the Missouri Statewide Independent Living Council, which is a governor appointed position.

And for now, that's quite enough. "Having the opportunity to help others and see them overcome their fears and challenges gives me nothing but great joy. I think the big picture is that I can make a difference. I'm blessed, absolutely I am blessed. Don't get me wrong. I would love to have my vision back. But I can use my life to encourage others." sjs

For more information on Dennis Atkins, call 816-273-7205 or email him at [Datkins7659@charter.net](mailto:Datkins7659@charter.net).

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## Book Review



Jolene Brackey has a vision. As we will soon look beyond the effects of Alzheimer's Disease and focus our energy on creating moments of joy. When a person has short-term memory loss, his life is made up of moments that are not able to create a perfectly happy day with those who have dementia. It is absolutely attainable to create wonderful moments – moments that bring smiles on their faces, a twinkling in their eyes, or trigger memories. Finally, later, they won't remember what was said, but the feeling you left behind will linger.

**Title** *Creating Moments of Joy*  
*for people with dementia*  
**Author** Jolene Brackey  
**Publisher** Purdue University