

Dennis Atkins, '77: Perseverance personified



Next to the definition of "perseverance" in the dictionary, Webster's might want to place a photo of Dennis Atkins.

The 1977 Western graduate's life, a story of grit, determination, resourcefulness, and just plain not giving up, is a laundry list of amazing accomplishments and fulfilled goals.

Last October, Dennis completed an amazing New Year's resolution that he had made 15 years ago: He logged his 50,000th running mile.

Those 50,000 miles, a distance equal to more than 100 round trips between Kansas City and St. Louis, or more than five times the distance between New York City and Sydney, Australia, included five marathons. In three of those, Dennis helped raise more than \$43,000 for a local charity.

And along the way, Dennis, who has worked for American Family Insurance since 1978, earned a doctorate in business administration in 2002.

That should be enough to inspire anyone, but there's more.

At the age of 23, Dennis was diagnosed with a progressive eye disease, and his vision has steadily worsened over the years. He has lost his peripheral vision and his ability to see at night; what remains is a blur.

Here is his story.

After graduation and a short stint at the American Family office in St. Joseph, Dennis began working in Topeka, Kan., where he joined a competitive softball team. That's when he began running, and after three months, he decided to start keeping track of his miles.



In 1979, still playing softball, he began having a hard time seeing fly balls during night games, and he made an appointment to get glasses.

But a routine eye exam quickly became more when it was followed by a battery of tests. Dennis was diagnosed with retinitis

pigmentosa, a genetic disorder that starts with decreased night vision and later progresses to diminished peripheral vision. Doctors told him to learn Braille because he would be blind in two years.

He and his wife, Brenda, had been married less than three months.

"You have three choices when you get a diagnosis like that," said Dennis. "You deny it, you let it destroy you, or you say, 'I'm going to continue to be successful regardless.'"

He chose option three.

"The Lord has blessed me. It's 26 years beyond that diagnosis and I'm still working and functioning in many things."

As the disease progressed, Dennis had to give up softball, but he continued to run and log his miles. "Running was a way for me to keep positive, focused and active."

By December 1989, Dennis, age 34, could no longer drive at night and was having a hard time going from light to dark places. It was a low point in his life, knowing that as time went by he would be needing more and more assistance from others.

"I realized I had to spend a lot more time in prayer, and that I needed a goal so I wouldn't give up; I knew I needed something that would not let me quit."

When he logged his 9,200th mile, he realized his running could provide just the beacon he needed. On New Year's Day 1990, he resolved to run 50,000 miles in his lifetime.

In order to make the goal a reality, Dennis increased his running from three to five miles, three to four times a week; to six to eight miles a day four days a week, and 10 to 12 miles on Saturday and Sunday. He also continued his vigorous exercise regimen to maintain muscles that could be worn down by the running.

In 1999, while managing an American Family office of 90 in St. Louis, he and Brenda decided to move back to St. Joseph. "The doctors said, 'you need to be where you want to be when you go blind,'" he said. "And Brenda and I decided we wanted to come home."

With his long-term goal of 50,000 miles in mind, Dennis continued to run. Three years ago he reached 40,000 miles.

At that point, people began encouraging him to run in marathons, and after some calculations, he decided to adjust his goal: run five marathons and reach the 50,000-mile mark during his fifth marathon, at age 50.

After two marathons, Dennis decided to turn his passion into a fund-raiser for a charity that meant a lot to him - Midland Empire Resources for Independent Living (MERIL), an organization whose goal is to help people with disabilities maintain their independence and continue living in their homes.

His last three marathons became the centerpiece of MERIL's annual Celebration Day.

For last fall's fund-raiser, Dennis decided to run in all nine counties of MERIL's service area to help spread their message. He ran 40 miles over five days on several high school tracks, and then ran a marathon on Western's campus on Saturday, Oct. 15. He reached his 50,000th mile on Western's circle drive.

Now that he's reached such an awesome milestone, what's next? "I may be 50, but I've got a lot more left to do. I'm not giving up running. I'd love to make it to 75,000," said Dennis.

And he's determined not to let his disability get in the way. "You'd be amazed at what you can do. You can't give in. That's the key - once you give in, it's lost."

That's the credo that has taken Dennis Atkins a distance equal to approximately one fifth of the way to the moon. ❧

THE DISASTER NAMED

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"That hurricane was so devastating. Seeing all those people desperately in need, it just didn't seem like there was enough help," he said.

"It was the most rewarding thing I've ever done. I'll never forget what it looked like, but I'll also never forget the people."

When Cyndra Lorey's, '02, employer, the St. Joseph Area Chamber of Commerce, offered their employees time off to volunteer after hurricane Katrina, she knew this was her chance to do something she had been wanting to do for a long time. So she called the Red Cross and offered two weeks of her time.

Cyndra assumed she would be deployed to the Gulf region, but when the Red Cross found out she was a former United Way campaign director, they assigned her to their Washington, DC headquarters to help with one of their donor programs.

She said that experience made her appreciate the work of the Red Cross, and realize how important the fund-raising effort is.

"Those who work in the forefront of a disaster are very important, but we often forget about the work that goes on behind the scenes to make it possible."

Sheila Bradham, '94, and Stacy Dunn, '89, spent two weeks in October in a sweltering New Orleans airport parking lot accepting applications from hurricane Katrina victims and directing them to resources.

They endured the smell and the "blistering" heat, they lived in tents, they showered in semis or tents, and they saw unbelievable destruction, but Sheila said she wants to go back. "Mold and death, that's all we smelled for two weeks," she said. "But we met so many wonderful people, we didn't want to leave. We'd do it again in a heartbeat."

