

## MY FAMILY FOUNDATION

My family and upbringing has been my strong foundation for my life. I have written several articles and spoke in my presentations about times in my childhood and adult life. I want to share with you in this article the amazing love and strength that I received and continue to receive today from my family members. I will start with a brief explanation where I grew up and then talk with you about each individual in my immediate family. I hope you can sense the importance and how valuable each person is to me.

I was born on a small farm between Fillmore and Rosendale, Missouri. My mother and father's parents owned and made their living as farmers. My parents started their married life together in an old farm house that was made out of logs. This was a perfect place for a little angel boy to start his life. Since this is my story, my older sister Gail taught me everything I knew and did. I know you now understand why I got in trouble with mom and dad at times. Gail, you knew I couldn't resist.

We lived on that little farm my dad, mom, sisters Gail and Rita, and me. Gail was the older, Rita was the baby, and I was the middle. Being in the middle was perfect since I was always in the middle of something. We moved to Rosendale when my dad purchased the hardware and feed store. This store played a huge part of all our lives. We all worked there when we were young. This was great since we got to know everybody for miles around. They would come in to purchase items and feed for their livestock.

As a child this small community gave us the chance to play all sports, sing in music contests and in church, be in scouts, and attend every event held. We learned the importance of family, love, and helping our neighbors. Within a few miles our grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all lived. What great fun we had every weekend and holidays. The Pittman and Atkins family was well known and respected by everyone. This was fine most of the time, but when my cousins got in trouble then everyone knew about it. It was tough for me since I was trying to live the perfect life. I must tell the truth. At a family funeral one of my cousin's wife's was listening to all the stories of our childhood. She said Dennis why were you mentioned in all of them. I said see the influence they had on me. What fun we had back then. What great joy.

I would not change a thing in my childhood. The small town atmosphere was wonderful for a child to be raised. Surrounded by an amazing loving family, we had no money but I never wanted for anything. The love of my parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and the community was all I needed to prepare me for my life ahead. Now I would like for you to meet my family. As I describe each member, I would like for you to think about your family or friends that impacted your life. Throw out any heart ache or negative thoughts; we could all focus on them. The joy is to throw those to the wind and just think about the good and positive feelings that can be generated with just a little thought.

## Meet My Father Lloyd

My father was a strong, loving, kind, and caring man. He had no enemies. Friends would surround him since he loved to laugh and usually was always smiling. He was a perfect role model for me. I loved all the time we spent together. When we lived on the farm, I wanted to be wherever he was. I remember going with him to hand pick corn, moving the cattle, getting in the milk cows, and working with the hogs. Sometimes I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Dad saved me by throwing me into the corn crib. One of the small pigs got caught and the sows were coming after me. Thanks Dad. He was always so brave. I wanted to grow up just like him.

My dad farmed with my grandpa and uncles. My uncles had a lot of fun at my expense my entire childhood. My uncle Dale still likes to tell the time that he vaccinated me along with the hogs. This three year old was very mad at his uncle. Now that I am single, I can tell all the women truthfully that I have been vaccinated. Who knew that my uncle Dale was actually helping me for the future?

Now back to my dad, he purchased the hardware and feed store. I spent every minute that I could with him at the store, delivering feed, or grinding feed. My dad taught me how to be a man. He valued honesty, telling the truth, and enjoyed serving his Lord. He took great delight in reading and studying his bible daily. He wanted the best for his children so raising us in a Christian home was very important to him.

The women always thought my father was very handsome. All the men highly respected him. He never knew a stranger. He was a quiet man but always went out of his way to see that everyone was welcome. I know all of you that know me are thinking I am just as quiet as dad. Okay maybe not!

I wish you all could have known my dad. I am still so proud of him today as I was back then. He too had his challenges. He had a stroke at age 51. He had a tough time getting a job after that. He took an hourly job at the hospital cleaning floors and doing laundry. He loved his job because he got to work with a lot of people. I would go visit him at his work. We would walk down the halls and Dad would call every person by their name. He knew all the nurses, doctors, and other employees. He worked at the hospital only a short time but he was named employee of the month twice. This hospital had several hundred employees so this was very special.

My Dad found out he had cancer in April 1985. He had surgery the week later which removed his left ear completely. The treatments caused him to lose all of his curly and wavy gray hair. He never lost hope of surviving. He had them give him a plastic ear and a gray wavy wig to wear. I remember Dad saying to all the women, you would have to go to the beauty shop for several hours to get your hair like this. I just need to pick it up and put it on. He could laugh through the difficult times. Dad, thank you for teaching me this.

The cancer took him home on November 15, 1985 at age 56. He lived only a little over six months after finding out he had cancer. Those six months were full of time with family and friends. We laughed and cherished every minute we were together. I miss you Dad but I am so thankful God chose you to be my father. Dad I have done the best I can and will continue to take care of our family as I promised. I love you and will see you soon.

### Meet My Mother Mary

WOW! Do I have a mother! My mother was named correctly when she was given the name of Mary. Mary is an honored name in the bible as we know. My Mom has always been a very beautiful woman, inside and out. Her heart is pure and always thinks of others before herself. She is always looking for someone to help or encourage.

Mom has given her life for her children. My older sister Gail and I both have Retinitis Pigmentosa. This is an eye disease that has left us both legally blind. My younger sister Rita is mentally challenged. Mom never gives up and finds great joy in all the daily struggles. Rita lives with mom still today. Mom says her happiness and joy is serving the Lord and helping her children.

Mom is a real go getter. She never sits still. She has Rita to take care of, repair things around her home, work in the flower bed, trim the bushes, decorate, paint inside and outside as needed. I called her the other day and she was out on the bank taking the broom and moving the wood chips back in place. This by itself is nothing special but she has two bad knees and a broken foot. Mom said sometimes she loses her balance and rolls head first down the bank. See where I get my determination to never stop or give up. Mom, I got this from you.

Mom loves to laugh and talk with friends and family. She is a frequent attendee of the senior citizen dances. She has always loved to dance. My mom and dad were great dancers. As I said above, she has the bad knees and a broken foot which do not stop her from going dancing. We cannot go anywhere in Northwest Missouri that Mom doesn't know someone. She is admired by everyone on how she has lived her life. She worked hard seeing that Rita has a chance to have an education in a time when there was limited opportunities for the mentally challenged. Mom encouraged all three of us to never give up. She is why we haven't. Mom, thank you for being there, it was tough when Dad died.

Even with all the daily chores, she still has the time to write about her life and poems. She has shared her life story with many others. She wrote her life journal with all the bible verses that carried her through the challenges in her life. Mom wakes up every day with a smile and a sense of thanksgiving. How incredible she is. She has three children with all of us having a disability. She is so proud of us. Is this not cool! Even better all three of her children adore her.

I am so thankful for my Mother. My parents gave me the love and encouragement throughout my life. Truly the way they raised us was such a blessing. My wish is that everyone that reads this could meet my mother. You would agree with me that she is amazing.

## Meet My Sister Gail

Now this is going to be fun introducing you to my sister Gail. She is a very musically talented and beautiful person. Anyone that has been out with the two of us realizes we remember our childhood stories differently. Gail is only 2 years and 11 days older than me. I love to call her on her birthday to say that she is 3 years older. She always argues but I have her take her age on that day minus mine. No matter how you figure it on her birthday, I am always 3 years younger. She cannot help it that she is not good at math.

Gail's middle name is Jean. I have for years called her Jean instead of Gail. The two of us had great fun growing up. She says that I got on her nerves. I just cannot remember doing that. We enjoy telling the things that happen in our younger days to family and friends. One of Gail's favorite stories is when I fell into a corner post hole at age 4. She remembers it that I took her high heels and took off running with them on. She was chasing me when I fell head first into the post hole. She ran to get Mom. Mom found me in the last hole about 4 feet down in the hole. My Dad had dug all the holes to build a new fence.

Now here is how I remember it. Jean told me to put her high heels on and see if I could run. I stopped at the hole to look in since there was a toad down there. She pushed me and I went head first into the hole. She did go get Mom to get me out. You can believe whichever story you want. But you need to remember that Gail is older. She could have selective memory.

Another story was when the two of us decided to swing on the refrigerator door. We lived on a farm where we raised chickens and had our own milk cows. In the refrigerator were fresh milk and a lot of eggs. You can picture what happened next. The two of us were just swinging away. Suddenly it fell over on us. My Mom came running and rescued us. What a mess it was with broken eggs and milk running all over the floor and on us. Jean says that I started swinging first on the door. She came over to join me. She told Mom that I did it first. I believe that is what happened. My only comment is that she is a lot older so she should have been smarter than that. She was to serve as an example for her younger brother.

Jean had this amazing talent to sing and play the piano. She won many first place ribbons in singing contests. She still has this God given talent. She sings like an angel. The two of us sang together when we were young at churches, community events, and when individuals requested us to sing at their homes.

Jean played softball and basketball in high school. She was a good athlete. She worked at the hardware store and the local cafe during high school. She took nothing off the boys that came into the cafe to pick on her. She challenged them to arm wrestle her. She beat them and they left her alone after that.

Jean went on to have four children. They were Chris, Shelley, Laura, and Rachel. Three girls and one boy kept her busy for many years. Jean went back to college to finish her degree. She honored us all with her efforts to get a Spanish and music degree from Missouri Western State. She did this with her vision failing. Remember she has Retinitis Pigmentosa like I do. Jean we were all proud of you.

Jean has spent many years studying her bible and taking bible classes. She followed Dad in that she too studies her bible daily. She loves to have discussions with others about her faith. She also loves to dance. She gets this from both Mom and Dad. She is a regular at the singles and other dances in St. Joseph.

I know that I have shared some funny stories on the two of us, but I would do anything for my sister. I am so glad that God gave me an older sister even if she is developing selective memory. Jean, I love you.

### Meet My Sister Rita

Rita has always been and continues to be very special to me. She was born mentally challenged. As a young child, she had a beautiful smile and spirit. I loved helping her to learn to ride her bike, play softball, basketball, and anything she wanted to do. She like the rest of the family keeps doing something until she gets it. My Mom has been her major care taker her whole life. Mom and Rita have this amazing bond and love for one another.

When Rita was young the school system where we lived had very few programs for Rita to learn and develop. My parents had to move to St. Joseph so Rita could attend Helen Davis School. Mom worked as a teacher's aide so she could help Rita and all the other children attending this school. My Mom and Dad had to work hard for Rita to have an opportunity to have a normal life. The programs were very limited for the mentally challenged back then.

Rita's middle name is Jo, so it was just natural for me to call her Jo Jo. Jo Jo loved growing up playing softball, basketball, swimming, bowling and running in the Special Olympics events. It was so great and inspiring seeing her and all her friends compete. They just gave their all for the ribbons and metals. They finally got the attention they deserved. They did not have to win but were just so happy being there.

Jo Jo loves to go to club with her friends. Club consists of going out to eat, seeing a movie, or doing something special with her friends. She loves to dance and sing like the rest of us. Mom has given her a microphone a few times to sing. Her favorite songs are 'One Day At A Time' and 'Put Your Hand In The Hand'. Rita loves this opportunity to be on center stage. Every day when I call, I always tell her to take her bath, brush her teeth, put on her makeup, and stink'em goody. I want her to look flat gorgeous.

Even today, Rita gets excited to see me. Her first word is Dennis! Then the next thing is, do you want to go to McDonalds? We can go to Taco Bell. She loves to go out to eat daily or just get a

coke. I always say yes I will take you out to eat. She then changes to; I do not have any money. I then say I will buy. Then I give her a few dollars to put in her purse for a later time. You had better not try to hold on to the money because she grabs it like it was the first time anyone gave her money. This whole event makes me smile and laugh every time I go back home.

Having Rita in my life has made me appreciate how lucky I am. She focuses on the simple and the basic things in life. She doesn't worry about a job, where the money is coming from, buying a home or car, but thinking about where she would like to go today. A few months ago, she did ask if she could buy her a new car. We do not know why she thought of that.

Rita Jo is just like the rest of us. She wants to be loved. She definitely doesn't like to be told what to do or told no. She has the stubborn spirit like the Atkins and Pittman family. You will definitely not push her around without her standing up for herself. If you earn a place in her heart, it will stay there for life.

Jo Jo, thank you for being such a big part in my life. God brought you into our family to serve as an example for us all. You are so beautiful. I love you.

#### Meet My Son Chad

Chad has been such a wonderful blessing in my life. His mother and I got married when Chad was four years old. Chad is my step-son but to me he has always been mine. I remember my Dad telling me, it doesn't make a man to have a child but you have to be one to raise them. I have always said that Chad and I grew up together.

I have always been proud of Chad. He was very athletic as a child. He played all sports. When he was young, he played football, basketball, softball, baseball, soccer, and wrestled. After he got in high school, he played football, baseball, wrestled, and lifted weights. Chad was very strong and a fast runner. He held the weight lifting records at his high school and at college. He played football one year at Missouri Western State University. He could have played other years in college, but his main focus was on football, women, and partying. I was proud of him for his accomplishments. Everyone grows up at a different age in their life.

Chad decided after the one year in college to enlist in the Air Force. He served his country for four years. He was an elite guard in the security force. He was deployed to Saudi Arabia stationed in the desert for several months. He left home to go to the Air Force as a boy and came home as a man.

Chad got married and has two beautiful children Emily and Ethan. He is a wonderful father and is very proud of his children. He has held several jobs over the years to support his family. One of the things that I am most proud of is he went back to college at age 33 on the GI Bill. He is now a surgical tech in a hospital. What great courage it was for him to do this. He has become the son that anyone would be proud of.

Chad is single now. He lives for the time and opportunities to be with Emily and Ethan. I have seen Chad become as proud of his children as I am of him. He has a very tender heart but at the same time you better not mess with him. He is still one of the strongest young men I have ever known. Ethan is going to have to grow up some more before he will be able to out run his Dad. Chad is very protective of his family and wants his children to have every opportunity to develop into fine adults.

Chad lives with me today. He helps me with my mail, getting groceries, picking out my clothes, and chores around the house. Son, I could not do it without you. There is one thing that I will always know that Chad will be always be there for me and I will be there for him. I love you Son.

Meet My Grand Children Emily and Ethan

Emily and Ethan are beautiful children. Emily is 13 and Ethan is 10. They give me such great joy. They are typical kids. They fight at times but no one better hurt the other one or the other one will come to the rescue.

Now about Emily, she is a true little lady. She loves to put on makeup, fix her hair, and dress in clothes that make her feel good. She loves talking with her friends on the phone, texting, and being on Facebook. Emily is the typical teenager in that she likes hanging with her friends. I have offered to go out with her and her friends. She always says the same thing, "No way" or says, "It's not going to happen".

Emily has loved to sing ever since she was very young. She knows all the words on the radio. She has a beautiful voice so I hope she gets her wish to sing some day. I love you darling. Grandpa always wants the best for you.

Ethan is a quiet little gentleman. He loves playing football, wrestling with his Dad, and going swimming. He loves riding his skate boards. He has no fear in doing flips and shooting off ramps. He is a real dare devil in that he would like to be a motor cross rider some day. The problem is that he tends to break bones like his arm and ankle.

You should see Ethan play football. For a little guy, he is not afraid to hit and tackle the ball carrier. He had the most tackles on his team. Way to go Ethan!

He likes going hunting and fishing if he can. He is going to be a real outdoorsman. He thinks that grandpa is too old to give him advice on girls. He and Emily both say that grandpa is way too old to date. Kids you are wrong. I am just in my prime.

Ethan I am proud of and love you. Remember never give up and go after your dreams.

Now you have met my immediate family. Can you see why I love each of them so? It has been my family and friends that have kept me strong and focused on never giving up. Having a strong family foundation can carry you through difficult times. You may had to face a death of a

loved one or close friend, divorce, or been diagnosed with a serious condition which could shatter your life and faith. I can relate to that for I have had to face the death of my Father, going blind, and a divorce. My faith, family, and friends kept me from losing hope and my desire to overcome. My foundation was shook and cracked in a few places, but it never collapse.

So you too can overcome major life challenges. Remember you are loved by God, your family, and friends. We can all find joy and happiness. My wish for you is that you never stop looking for what makes you smile and feel strong. For you too, are loved.

Dr. Dennis W. Atkins

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