

SEAN'S

WHILE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

By Lynne Crandall and Jennifer Johnson

Every Wednesday, Sean Atkisson wears white. This is the day he attends the temple with his wife, Tawnya, to serve and to remember the covenants they have made there. Sean stays in white the entire day because he has been quadriplegic since 2006 and needs someone to help him dress. Their weekly service in the temple is a small representation of how the Atkissons' lives are guided by their baptismal and temple covenants. In this and many other ways, they serve others in spite of often needing service themselves. Through what many would consider unimaginable hardship, they remain devoted disciples of Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel

Sean was raised a member of Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) in Washington, USA. In high school some friends invited him to attend seminary with them, and he began learning about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "My idea was that if I would go to church with them, they would go with me," he says. "We never made it that far. I made it to church with them, and then I was baptized." That was the beginning of Sean's covenant path.

Soon after high school graduation, he served a mission to Colombia. His parents moved across the country while he was gone, so he returned to their new home in Missouri. It was there that he met Tawnya at a daylong Church activity ending in a barn dance. She was not a member of the Church, but like Sean in high school, she had been invited to participate by a Latter-day Saint friend. "That was the first thing I had ever gone to Church-wise, so I didn't know anything," Tawnya says, laughing. When Sean told her he was a returned missionary, she didn't know what he meant.

Sean helped the missionaries teach Tawnya, and soon she too decided to be baptized. A few months after she joined the Church, Sean and Tawnya were married. A year after her baptism, they were sealed in the temple.

Over the next 12 years they had five children and moved several times as Sean earned two master's degrees, one in social work and another in human development and family studies. At age 29, Sean was called as a bishop in Washington. Eventually the Atkissons returned to Missouri, where Sean practiced as a therapist.

Sudden Stillness

One afternoon in October 2006, Sean climbed a tree to bird-watch and take

*Even when they thought they couldn't serve,
the Atkissons kept their covenants and found
ways to bless the Lord's children.*



photographs in the wooded area behind his house. He lost his balance and fell to the ground onto his head, paralyzing him from the neck down. He was 45. For nearly seven hours Sean lay on the ground, assuming that the reason he couldn't move was that he was in shock. As Tawnya and others searched the woods for him, he said a prayer that he would live. "If I could, then I would repent of things that I had done in my life and try to make my life better and more worthy," he promised the Lord.

They found him after dark that evening, and he spent the next month in an induced coma while doctors stabilized him. In addition to meeting such physical challenges as learning how to breathe without a ventilator, Sean and his family had to come to terms with their new life. For Tawnya, life seemed to stop suddenly when the accident happened and then restart. She said it took a number of years for them to get to a place where they felt stable. "It felt like we were riding a roller coaster that was out of control," she says.

Tawnya explains that Sean's positive attitude made all the difference. He remembered his promise to the Lord that he would improve, and he kept his word. He tried to make his life and the lives of those around him better by having a happy attitude and being easy to work with. Ten



LIFELONG DISCIPLESHIP

"Making the covenant to be a disciple of Christ is the beginning of a lifelong process, and the path is not always easy. As we repent of our sins and strive to do what He would have us do and serve our fellowmen as He would serve them, we will inevitably become more like Him. Becoming like Him and being one with Him is the ultimate goal and objective—and essentially the very definition of true discipleship."

Elder Daniel L. Johnson of the Seventy, "Becoming a True Disciple," *Ensign*, Nov. 2012, 102.

years later, Tawnya says he's still patient and kind on even his hardest days.

Sean had lived an active life, and he remembers how hard it was to be still and stare at the same spot for hours. Time seemed to pass slowly, and Sean had to get used to spending a lot of that time alone, which was new for him. "It bothered me that I didn't think that I could take an active role in my family," he says. However, Sean and Tawnya feel that their service in the Church at an early age prepared them for the stillness after the accident.

Sean says that throughout his recovery and adjustment, "I felt, at what seemed to be the lowest times, that tender mercies would come my way. They would lift my hope for another day and let me see things a little bit differently."

Sean spent time in several different medical facilities, and then the Atkissons decided to move to Utah. Tawnya and their two daughters still living with them traveled there to find a place to live, and Sean followed a month later. Tawnya enrolled in nursing school, fulfilling a longtime dream. She remembers that going to school was good for her but extremely hard because she also worked two jobs. "I have no idea how I did it," she says. "Certainly it wasn't me. The Lord was really there, and I've been blessed with wonderful jobs since."

As she works and cares for Sean, members of their ward also help them. For example, members of the high priests group often help Sean eat dinner because he can't feed himself, and they built a ramp outside the Atkissons' house to accommodate Sean's wheelchair.

Desires to Serve God

Sean and Tawnya remark that many couples where one spouse becomes quadriplegic choose to get divorced, but the Atkissons' temple marriage became the foundation that helped them stay together. "We had covenants that we needed to live up to," Sean says. Living up to their covenants has helped them and their children heal.

What also helped them was fulfilling their dream of serving as senior missionaries. One of Sean's first thoughts



Sean dresses in a shirt and tie every day to fulfill his missionary calling.

after his accident was that he and Tawnya would never be able to serve a mission as a couple because of his physical challenges. To him it seemed like there was nothing he could do. He was disappointed because he had wanted to serve as a senior missionary ever since serving as a young man and seeing the incredible examples of senior couples.

But then, after helping a Church-service missionary on a Church history project, Sean himself was called to be a Church-service missionary for the Church History Department, primarily researching the Peter Whitmer family. “What a joy it was to receive a call,” he says. Because of advances in technology, Sean is able to do research on a computer that works by voice commands.

Mark Staker, a lead curator in the Church History Department who directs Sean’s work, says that Sean is a dedicated and productive missionary. When he stopped by the Atkissons’ house unannounced one day, he found Sean working on his computer. “I came in and Sean had on his white shirt and his tie and his name badge,”

Brother Staker says. Sean dresses in a shirt and tie every day to fulfill his missionary calling.

The Atkissons’ dreams of serving as senior missionaries were further fulfilled when Tawnya was called to serve as a Church-service missionary in the Church’s Addiction Recovery Program. She has found joy in serving, meeting weekly with participants and giving presentations. “[The Lord] is the only one who can put us together in missionary callings that utilize our talents and gifts and help us to contribute, even at a time in our life when you wouldn’t think we could,” she says. “He takes our small amount of effort and what we do and magnifies it.”

Tawnya says it’s been a joy to learn to accept and love people because they are children of God. The Atkissons truly feel that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (D&C 18:10). As they have served despite their difficulties and have kept their covenants, they have been blessed with opportunities to strengthen their relationship with each other and with the Savior. ■

The authors live in Utah, USA.