

A Father's Journey

Written by Kirstina Bolton



In 2007, Barry Adkins set out on a journey of a lifetime, walking more than 1,400 miles from Arizona to Montana, carrying nothing more than a walking stick and his son's ashes. Over the next five years, Adkins has spoken to more than 75,000 students and parents across the country about the risk of alcohol and significance of forgiveness. Here, AZFoothills talks with Adkins on the importance of fatherhood and how his 18-year-old son ultimately inspired him to make a difference in the lives of others.



What was Kevin like as a boy and young man?

In elementary and junior high he had a reputation of befriending challenged kids. One of the kids he befriended was in a wheelchair. The boy's name was David. He would push David around the school in his wheelchair.

David's mom would drop him off at our house. The wheelchair stayed at the front door. Kevin would drag him around or he would crawl until he was exhausted. David was filthy by the end of the day, but he had fun.

As Kevin grew older, he had a habit of stopping and helping people beside the road. He would often come home and tell me about stopping and helping someone on the road that, honestly, scared me to death.

Can you talk about what you felt the night of and morning after finding about Kevin's death?

Kevin had just moved out on his own that day. I honestly didn't want him to move out as we had never had a problem with him. I didn't want him to get in over his head financially as I had just cosigned a loan for a new truck. As it turns out, Kevin wouldn't live long enough to make a single payment on that truck.

His friends decided to throw a house warming party for him. Sometime around midnight, he started doing shots. He passed out a short time later. His friends laid him in his bed, on his side, in case he vomited. They also went back in to his room and shaved his head and legs while he was passed out. His friend, Craig, was concerned so he went back in to check on him around 4:00 AM. The first calls to 911 were "difficulty breathing", the next were "not breathing." Kevin was pronounced dead alone in a hospital while I slept peacefully in my bed.

The next morning, Gilbert police came to my house. I didn't think much of it. I figured it probably had something to do with a neighbor, a dog or something along those lines. They told us there had been an accident and your son is dead. They then handed me his driver's license. There is something pretty final about it when a police officer tells you your son is dead and hands you his driver's license, because until the officer handed me his drivers license, I was convinced this was all a big mistake, but when they hand you your child's drivers license, you know he's gone and he's not coming back.

What led you to take this walk, and why Montana?

One of the things I knew early on was that I didn't want to be known as a victim—the world already has plenty of them. I also knew that the most I could hope for was to make "something very good" come from this tragedy.

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As one would expect, we struggled with what to do with Kevin's ashes.

I grew up in Kalispell, Montana and Kevin always talked about wanting to move there someday and buy a ranch. One of Kevin's favorite movies was Lonesome Dove. I won't give away the ending of that movie, because I think everyone should see it, but suffice to say that is where I got the idea.

I decided I was going to put his ashes in my backpack and walk from Arizona to Montana. I partnered with NotMYkid who financed the effort and organized all the speaking engagements. I shared Kevin's story with over 10,000 students along the way.



Would you mind talking about some things you thought about on your hike? What did you tell people when they asked why you were walking?

There were two things I came to understand very clearly on my journey.

The first is forgiveness. Learning to forgive others and ourselves can be very difficult to do, but forgive we must. We often see loved ones on TV talking about how they want "justice" for a loved one. Justice is important, but forgiving is far more important. If you don't forgive, it can and will destroy your life.

It was relatively easy for me to forgive the adults at the party Kevin attended that fateful night. Forgiving my child was easy, but the hardest one to forgive was myself. There has to be something I could have done differently to prevent this tragedy from happening. It took me 1,400 miles to clearly understand this, but I have found a way to forgive myself. Forgive, yes, forget, never.

The second is that God alone is in charge, not you. He has a plan for each of us, a plan we may not like. I guarantee you that this was not part of my plan, but as the saying goes, "If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans."

I had people stop everyday to talk. Often when I told them why I was on the road, they would tell me about problems with alcohol they had personally experienced, whether it be themselves, a child or a loved one. Probably the neatest visit I had was from a Flagstaff police officer. He asked me if I was the guy who had spoke at his son's high school a week earlier. I said I was. He gave me a hug and said, "What you said made an impact on my son. Thank you for doing that."

It was things like this that made my feet hurt a little less!

What has Father's Day been like since Kevin passed away?

It would be a lie to say it isn't different, but I do have surviving children and grandchildren that make it still good. Kevin would have wanted it that way.

I have very fond memories of the father's day before Kevin passed away. The kids wrote down their favorite memories of me on pieces of colored paper and put them in a decorated jar. We sat and read them together on

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Father's Day. Without a doubt, my favorite Father's day gift.

What would you tell other fathers who may have great relationships with their son, or may not have a relationship with them at all?

Time is the most precious gift you can give them. Tomorrow is not guaranteed.

What is the best part about being a father?

Now that my children are grown I don't have to discipline them. I have also noticed that apparently I have gotten smarter since they were teenagers, teenagers that didn't think their dear old dad was all that cool or smart. They now ask my advice all the time.

What do you miss most about being Kevin's father?

I miss Kevin. We used to play golf, go hunting and work on vehicles together. We spent a lot of time together.



What do you hope people will gain from your experience and your message?

My goals are to prevent this kind of tragedy from happening and serve as an inspiration (as strange as that sounds to me) to others that face tragedy in their lives.

As a parent, our job is to guide our children. We often worry about relatively small things like grades, cleaning your room, etc. In my opinion, the two most important things to talk to your children about are drugs and alcohol. The decisions your children make about these two things trump everything else.

I have heard story after story from parents whose kids were great students and wonderful young adults, but made bad decisions regarding drugs and/or alcohol and greatly damaged (if not destroyed) their lives. Don't think for a second that it's "just alcohol." Most drugs are tried for the first time under the influence of alcohol. Educate them about these two subjects as if their lives depended on it, because it does.

I have watched many interviews with war veterans that talk about how they can't forgive themselves for what happened. Find a way to make something very good come from what happened and it will set you on the path to forgiveness. Do it, before it destroys your life.

Our lives are often defined by how we respond to adversity. If an old hillbilly like me can manage to walk from Arizona to Montana with his son's ashes in his backpack, imagine what you can do!

When I returned from my journey I told friends and family that I was going to put together a binder with photographs from the walk and my journal. To my surprise, this didn't sit well with some of them. I was told that I had to write a book, because "this is a story that must be told." Initially, I didn't want to write this book as I had just completed an exhausting 1,400-mile journey and my interest level in committing to another big project was rather small. But time has a way of healing a person's body and soul, so I wrote the book "Kevin's Last Walk, A Father's Final Journey With his Son." My story and—for better or worse—my words.

I have a newfound respect for writers. I think it was more work to write the book than it was to walk 1,400 miles!

To learn more about Barry Adkins and NotMYKid, visit www.kevinslastwalk.com.