

St. Louis attorney and his wife take their desire to help needy families to unexpected 'Heights'



By Brian Cox

The initial idea was modest – to help a dozen or so kids whose families lived in an economically depressed neighborhood known as “The Heights.”

St. Louis attorney Chandler Atkins and his wife, Laura, could barely have imagined how that modest goal would blossom into a program that over the years has positively affected the lives of more than a thousand children.

As college students at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Mo., Atkins and Laura took part in a Vacation Bible School program through their church where they encountered kids whose home life was disrupted by addiction and poverty. Many returned at the end of the day to homes where no one was waiting for them. Atkins recalls one family with six kids living in a small, three-bedroom house; all the kids slept on the floor in one room.

Even for Atkins, who had grown up in a rural town in southern Illinois and was familiar with having little money, the level of need was eye-opening.



The Atkinses started the New Heights Tutoring and Mentoring program when they were in college in 2005. The program has grown to involve upwards of 60 kids and their families.

“We wanted to do something to help those kids,” says Atkins. “We were just looking for a way to connect with kids and help them and give them support through the church and it sort of became a tutoring and mentoring program.”

Almost 20 years later, New Heights Tutoring and Mentoring is now a nonprofit organization that regularly engages with more than 50 children and their families on a weekly basis. Along the way, the program first got a church van and then a school bus to transport kids to activities that range from fishing to visits to a museum or bike riding. Atkins even has his Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) so he can drive the bus.

After Atkins and Laura got married, they purchased their first house in the Heights in order to be closer to the families they had come to know through the program.

“We lived in the neighborhood because we wanted to focus on the kids and their families,” says Atkins. “As part of that we got to know the kids very well. Our house was a kind of safe house where they could come if they needed something.”

They held neighborhood barbecues and volunteered for community projects such as rebuilding the local park, which was once dilapidated and now features a new playground as well as soccer and football fields obtained through grants due, in part, to the community service hours invested in the community.

“Some of the families we’ve met through the tutoring program are some of our best friends now,” says Atkins, who has received several awards for his community service, including one from the Missouri Bar’s Young Lawyers Section, a recognition from the lieutenant governor, and being named Volunteer of the Year in law school.

Atkins and his wife remain the program’s directors, but now their children also are involved.

“It’s been rewarding for me to see my kids be friends with kids from a very different background that they otherwise would

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not," says Atkins. "I feel it helps connect my kids to how most people live their lives and to how a good segment of our society lives."

Atkins' desire to make a difference in society is, in part, what attracted him to law – also, his mother strongly encouraged it. So, after graduating from Lindenwood with a degree in history, he enrolled at St. Louis University Law School.

He found he enjoyed trial work and the courtroom after clinics with the public defender's office and a legal aid society. A clerking job with Rick Wuestling at the firm Wuestling & James in St. Louis revealed a career path for Atkins in insurance defense.

"I was able to see Rick work and assist him with trials," says Atkins, who credits Wuestling with taking him under his wing. "One of the things I valued about Rick is that he would not just dole out assignments. He would explain the 'why' behind what it was you were doing."

Wuestling recognized Atkins' ability to communicate well with people and often sent the young lawyer out to talk with



Attorney Chandler Atkins and his wife, Laura, have three children: (l-r) Landon, 13; Abigail, 11; and Everett, 9.

witnesses, who trusted Atkins and would cooperate with him. He also proved himself by holding his ground in hotly contested cases against difficult opposing counsel.

Wuestling stressed the importance of professionalism and attention to detail.

"Rick taught me that you have to analyze the facts with the law and pull out the attention to detail that's called for in cases to set up successful dispositive motions and trial theories," says Atkins. "And that's one of the things I like the most about my practice. I like the investigative part, I like the necessary attention to detail, and I like the competitive aspect of trial work."

Atkins' practice centers primarily around representing defendants in the areas of wrongful death, automobile liability, dram shop, retail and premises liability.

"I like representing businesses and clients that I care about," Atkins says.

He can relate to his clients, many of whom are small business people "who started a business and are trying to live their lives and raise their families and help their community when something unforeseen happens."

The Wuestling & James firm integrated with Roberts Perryman about five years ago, a transition Atkins says was seamless. The firm, which has 15 lawyers, focuses on insurance defense, insurance coverage, trucking defense, and legal malpractice. The firm has been a Primerus™ member since 2017.

"Through Primerus™, we get to work with great lawyers across the country who focus on the same things we do," says Atkins, who is involved with the Premises Liability Defense Practice Group. "We get resources from Primerus™ that help us with our practice, whether its learning about national trends, gaining



Chandler and Laura Atkins with their children (l-r) Abigail, Everett, and Landon.

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insight from other jurisdictions, or hearing from experts. We also get to offer that to our clients.”

The Atkins family lives now on in a rural subdivision where they have chickens and Atkins enjoys keeping bees, though he hasn't had much luck producing honey. They frequently host dinners, bonfires, fishing, and games for New Heights. His wife, Laura, is a high school special education and government teacher. Together they coach a mock trial high school team that a few years ago advanced to the state championships. The couple has three children: Landon, 13; Abigail, 11; and Everett, 9.

There is a larger family, too, of course —the one the Atkinses have built through New Heights.

Since starting the mentoring and tutoring program back in 2005, the Atkinses have had the chance to see many of the children involved with the group go on to attend college, start careers, and begin families of their own.

“It's great to see kids who come from a background that was similar to mine and now they've got great families, they're serving in their community, they're going to school or have completed school,” Atkins says. “It's very gratifying.”