

This past fall, Ben and Judy Atkinson wanted to do something special to honor their late daughter Amy on what would have been her twenty-fourth birthday. So they did something they thought Amy would have done. They bought her piano teacher, Mary Anne Schreff, an angel and a small “Hugs from Heaven” book. The gifts seemed appropriate, because Mary Anne was Amy’s favorite person and Amy, who died last December 26 of pneumonia, was indeed an angel who touched hundreds of lives.

When she was growing up, Amy always wanted to be like her older sister Tracy. So

just like the other students.”

When Amy’s school, the Gateway Education Center, held a talent show, Mary Anne knew it was the perfect opportunity for Amy to show-off her new skill. Mary Anne and Amy prepared a duet for the big day. Because Amy had so little muscle control, she could only play with one finger at a time. Amy played the main scale for the song “Do-Re-Me” from *The Sound of Music*, and Mary Anne filled in all the other notes.

“That talent show gave Amy a real identity at school, people knew she took piano,” Mary Anne says. “All of the students knew I

AMY’S GIFT

when she turned twelve in 1991, she begged Ben and Judy to let her take piano lessons, just like Tracy did.

AMY ADAIR

But Amy was just not like her older sister. She was born with spina bifida, a condition that affects about one in every thousand children born in the United States. Amy’s condition meant that her spine did not develop properly during the first months of pregnancy. She also suffered from severe mental retardation and was paralyzed from the waist down.

Ben and Judy talked to Mary Anne, Tracy’s teacher. Besides teaching piano, she was the organist at Trinity Evangelical Covenant Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, where the Atkinsons also attend. Mary Anne knew that Amy would need extra attention, patience, and love during her lessons, but she wanted to try to teach Amy.

Since Amy was unable to sit on the piano bench, Mary Anne strapped her into a wheelchair and set up a keyboard at her level. Mary Anne also labeled every note for her and showed her where it was on the keyboard.

“Amy just took pleasure in the fact that she did something that other people did,” Mary Anne says. “She could tell people that she played the piano. She came every week

was Amy’s piano teacher.”

Teaching Amy was not easy. “I think God worked through me,” Mary Anne says, “because I do have a very busy schedule with a lot of students. But it was really a blessing to me to see how much the piano lessons blessed Amy and how much it meant to her.”

Although Mary Anne did not receive payment for the lessons, she received something even more valuable—true friendship and unconditional love. Amy told everyone that Mary Anne was her best friend.

“What a wonderful friend Amy was to me,” Mary Anne says. “She always sensed what kind of mood I was in. She’d always give me hugs and tell me how much I meant to her. We could all learn a lot from Amy about how to be a friend.”

Ben could also see how the piano lessons were positively affecting Amy. “The bond between Amy and Mary Anne was indescribable,” Ben says. “And the fact that Mary Anne took the time to work with Amy was a true blessing.”

Amy’s relationship with Mary Anne was something her father could never have imagined for his daughter when she was born in September 29, 1979. He feared what her condition would mean for her life.

“When I first found out about Amy’s handicap all I could see was this person in a wheelchair,” Ben admits. “If God hadn’t been with Judy and me, we couldn’t have done it. We got all of our strength from God. There were times when we were completely overwhelmed.”

The Atkinsons knew they could not care for Amy on their own. So they began searching for a program for her. They found the Gateway Education Center, right in their

another day program for Amy, once she finished at Gateway. But the program would have to have a medical person on staff that could give Amy constant attention—she needed to visit the nurse so often at Gateway she was eventually assigned a personal nurse.

The Atkinsons couldn’t find anything that fit Amy’s needs. Ben began sharing his concerns with some other parents. They too were concerned about their children’s lives after they graduated from Gateway. Then they

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hometown of Greensboro. Gateway, which is funded by the public school system and United Way, is a day program serving severely handicapped children from birth to age twenty-two. Amy started attending shortly after birth for physical therapy. When she reached school age, she enrolled full-time. This gave her an opportunity to attend school, just like any other child.

As Amy grew older, the Atkinsons began planning for her life when she turned twenty-two and graduated from Gateway. They hoped that she could eventually do some volunteer work. But in 1998, Amy suffered a major setback when she developed pneumonia.

“We came very close to losing her [then],” Ben remembers. “She was in the ICU for two months. She also developed diabetes and had to be put on a feeding tube. When this happened, it closed the door to what she could do with her life after she graduated from Gateway.”

The Atkinsons knew they had to find

started dreaming about opening their own day program for severely handicapped adults.

“We never actually thought it would happen,” Ben says. “I asked the church and the choir to pray about it. It was nothing that we could have accomplished by ourselves. We had to rely on our faith to take the first step.”

Ben says he and the other parents had a lot of energy but very little focus. So they hired a consultant to help them with the initial planning and budget. While they were able to get a few grants, the parents raised most of the \$500,000 needed to start the program, known simply as After Gateway. They participated in the Human Race, a 5K fundraising run organized by the Volunteer Center, a local charity. Amy raised \$14,000 in support.

“Amy was not sponsored by any major corporation,” Ben says. “It was all pledges from the members of Trinity Covenant Church. There’s no way we could have done this with-

Amy Atkinson with Mary Anne Schreff (left) and her family, Tracy, Judy, and Ben Atkinson (center and right)

Amy Adair is a freelance writer from Elmhurst, Illinois.

out the help of the church. Their support went a long way.”

(After Amy’s death, the Volunteer Center celebrated her life by creating the annual Amy Atkinson Achievement Award, given to the top individual fundraiser in the Human Race. In 2003, the award was presented to the Atkinson family after they raised \$16,615 for After Gateway.)

On February 10, 2001, a year before Amy graduated, the After Gateway program, which

initially had four clients, opened with two nurses on staff to serve those who like Amy needed constant medical attention.

“Ben started After Gateway for Amy,” Mary Anne says. “He has a great capacity to motivate people. It was a much needed school for these young people who didn’t have any thing else to do except sit home and vegetate.”

In June of 2002, Amy graduated and the Atkinsons excitedly looked forward to her future at After Gateway. Ben knew Amy thrived on being with people, so one of his main goals was to get the After Gateway students

out in the community. Twice a week they would go to places like the swimming pool, a museum, or even the bowling alley. “We really wanted the students out in public,” Ben says. “They love to interact with people.”

Amy once again made a mark for herself at her new school. Mary Anne and Amy played the piano for the students right before Christmas. “I’m so thankful we had those opportunities,” Mary Anne says. “We even played for the church. We had some great times.”

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Amy Atkinson

The people close to Amy felt a tremendous loss when she died. But it wasn’t until the day of the funeral that the Atkinsons realized just how many people Amy’s short life had impacted.

“Our church holds about 250 people,” Ben says. “So many people showed up at the funeral that we had to turn some of them away. This was for someone who couldn’t even talk. She touched that many people.”

Cards began to flow in after the funeral. Many mentioned Amy’s up-beat attitude and dazzling smile. “The Atkinsons poured so much love into Amy,” Mary Anne says. “She couldn’t contain that love, it just poured out onto other people that she came into contact with.”

Ben knew that even though Amy was gone he still needed to continue his work with After Gateway. Even though he works forty hours a week as a mail carrier, he still finds time to devote to After Gateway. He’s the vice-president of the board and will be the president next year. Earlier this year, he was honored for his work by the Points of Light Foundation.

Currently, After Gateway serves fifteen clients. “We underestimated the need for this program,” Ben says. “People outside of the Gateway program need it, too.”

Ben has big dreams for the future of After Gateway. He is currently putting together a capital campaign and hopes to raise \$10 million dollars so the program can move out of the three rooms that they rent from a local church and into a brand new facility.

To Ben Atkinson, After Gateway is more than just a school. It’s a labor of love that keeps his daughter’s legacy alive. And everyday he knows he’s helping people just like Amy who desperately need a quality day program.

“I don’t know why God gave us Amy,” Ben says. “I’m just glad he did. She taught us so much about the meaning of God’s love.”

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