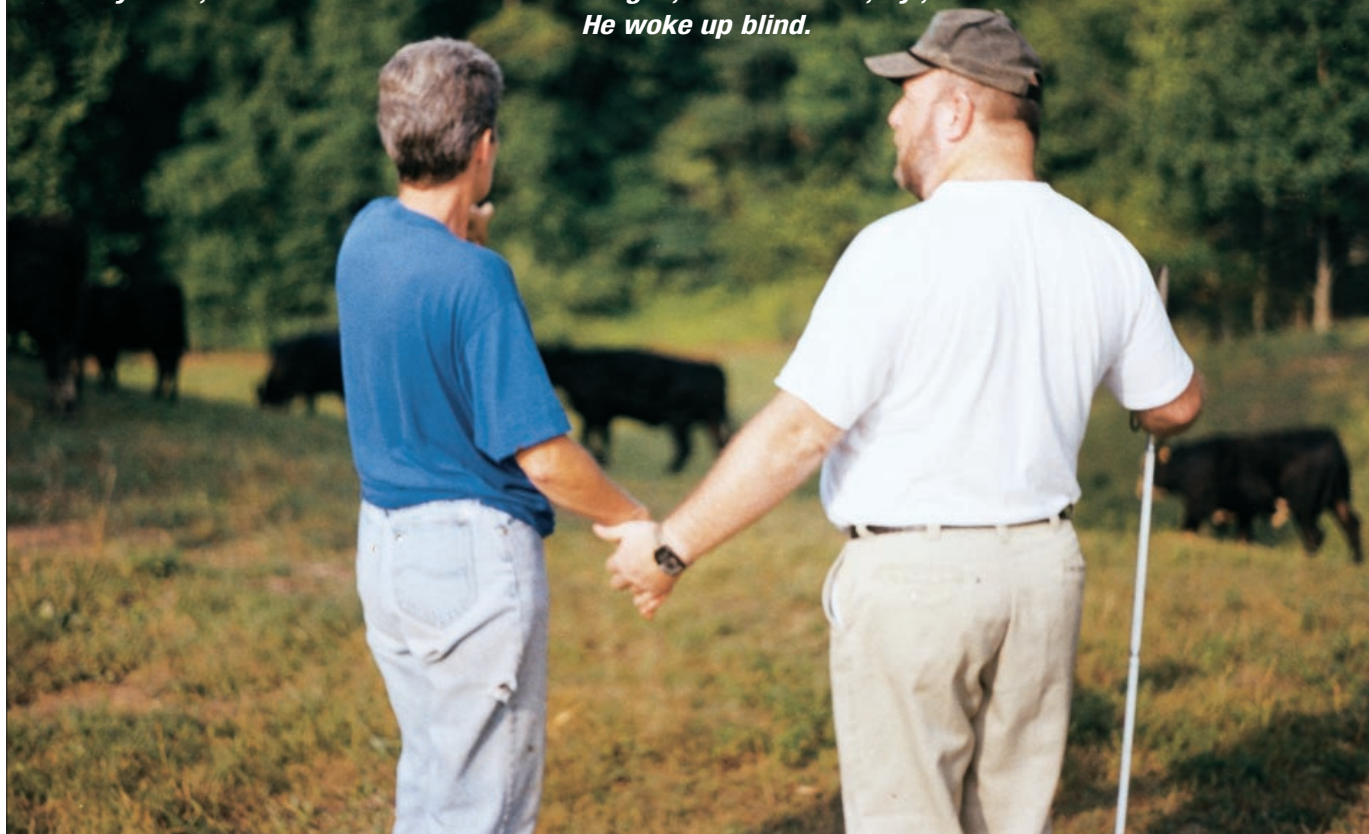


Through Emily's Eyes

He awoke in a different world. Everything was black. No lights. No shadows. He touched his wife beside him, but he couldn't see her. He couldn't see anything. On that hot summer morning in July 1995, Dennis Gibson of Twin Creek Angus, Bradfordsville, Ky., had his worst fear come true: He woke up blind.



It's the picture of devotion — to each other and to the herd they enjoy together. Losing his sight to Wegener's granulomatosis, Dennis Gibson relies on wife Emily to describe the herd to him. "Some of my best memories are going out into the pasture and sitting down to watch my cattle with Emily," says Dennis, who finds the cattle relaxing. "I can still picture them in my mind when I'm out there today, even though I can't see them like I used to."

BY JENNIFER HOTCHKISS

The events leading to Dennis' blindness were gradual, beginning in June 1990 on summer vacation. His legs became stiff, and the following morning he couldn't move his legs at all. The pain in his legs eventually subsided, and he was back to normal. But in October Dennis faced the first of many bouts with flu-like symptoms.

Years of doctors' visits, tests and surgeries followed, but nothing could explain the cause of Dennis' illnesses and severe inflammation in his eyes, prostate and sinuses. The condition worsened in December of 1996 when the inflammation reached his lungs.

Finally, an antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibody (ANCA) test confirmed Dennis had Wegener's granulomatosis (WG), a form of vasculitis (inflammation of the blood vessels) and an autoimmune disease (meaning the body's immune system attacks its own body tissues).

Wegener's is uncommon, difficult to diagnose and has no known cause. It is not contagious, cancerous or hereditary. The disease has no cure, but early diagnosis and proper treatment can be effective in bringing the disease into remission.

■ Emotional adjustment

Dennis was angry when he learned his prognosis. "I couldn't understand why this happened to me," he says. "I tried to look at the good side. The Lord still gave me the opportunity to be with my family."

Despite the devastating news, Dennis was

determined to fight the disease and continue his work as a supervisor at the Matsushita Corp. in Danville, Ky.

"He's not a quitter," says Emily, his wife. "He'd go to work all day and come home and work until midnight. There were times when he was so sick and worked so hard that he could barely walk across the floor at night."

Dennis' life changed rapidly as the disease progressed. He and Emily averaged two or three weekly 180-mile round-trips to Lexington for doctor appointments.

The man who never had taken more than 10 aspirin in his whole life was now taking 20 pills per day to reduce the inflammation and decrease the pain.

As the inflammation invaded his eyes, his vision deteriorated, and he was forced to

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leave the job where he had worked for 24 years. Dennis was unable to care for himself, and Emily, too, was forced to quit her job of 18 years as a secretary with American Greetings Corp., Danville.

While Emily's time was consumed with helping Dennis, the Gibsons' family-owned farm began to fall apart. Meanwhile, their tenant farmer became ill, and Emily quickly filled the roles of farm manager and hired hand.

When Dennis became sick, their son, Shawn, transferred his hours from the University of Kentucky to a local community college where he could take classes and help with the farm responsibilities.

As time went on, Dennis' eyesight worsened.

"We knew that things were taking a wrong turn," Shawn says. "But we kept hoping for a miracle. We never lost hope."

The doctors' predictions became true, however, when Dennis woke up blind during the summer of 1995.

"I was scared to death," Dennis says. "It was like my whole life had just landed in my lap. It's one of those situations that you think can't happen to you. But it can."

■ Hard decisions

Dennis suggested that Emily sell the cattle.

"I knew in the bottom of my heart this was more than his dream; it was our dream," Emily says. "Sometimes it's hard to stay in this business. I know people look at us and think we're crazy because he's blind and I'm a woman."

Everyone who knows the Gibsons, however, understands.

"Their Angus herd is what keeps them going," says Joe Burton, their core seedstock supplier. "When you look at how much they've been through, you'd wonder how they could even keep the cattle. But they've done more than keep their cattle. They've improved their cattle through it all."

Though the Gibsons are fairly new to the Angus business, they've taken the right steps to develop their herd, recent visitor Keith Van Dyke, Manhattan, Mont., says. Their numbers are small, but their goal is to focus on using cattle with nationally known and respected pedigrees to create a high-quality herd using proven AI (artificial insemination) sires.

"I want to continue to raise the right kind of cattle that meet my customers' needs," Dennis says. "Someday, whether I'm



JENNIFER HOTCHKISS PHOTOS

With the assistance of a special computer that will scan information, then read it back to him, Dennis researches pedigrees, learns about new AI sires, reads cattle magazines and surfs the Internet.

here or gone, I want people to look back and say I was a real producer."

The Gibsons chose the Angus breed because the American Angus Association has the most tools available for its members to improve their cattle.

They use the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program to report herd data and establish expected progeny differences (EPDs), helping them to build a strong genetic database.

Dennis uses the Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) program on his special computer, which reads everything to him. He scans anything he wants to read into his computer, and the computer reads it back. These tools allow Dennis to research pedigrees, learn about new AI sires, read cattle magazines and surf the Internet for information.

"I depend on him to stay up on things," Emily says. "I don't have the time to sit down and read anymore. As Dennis learns more about these computer programs, he can take that extra work off my shoulders so I can focus on the outside chores."

■ Changing roles

Instead of giving up on their dreams when Dennis became blind, the Gibsons decided to switch roles. Emily took over the responsibility of the Angus herd, including the feeding, vaccinating, calving, breeding



Besides being the Gibsons' only livelihood, the cattle have served as Emily's escape. While she stays busy with the cattle, she keeps her mind off Dennis' illnesses and an uncertain future.

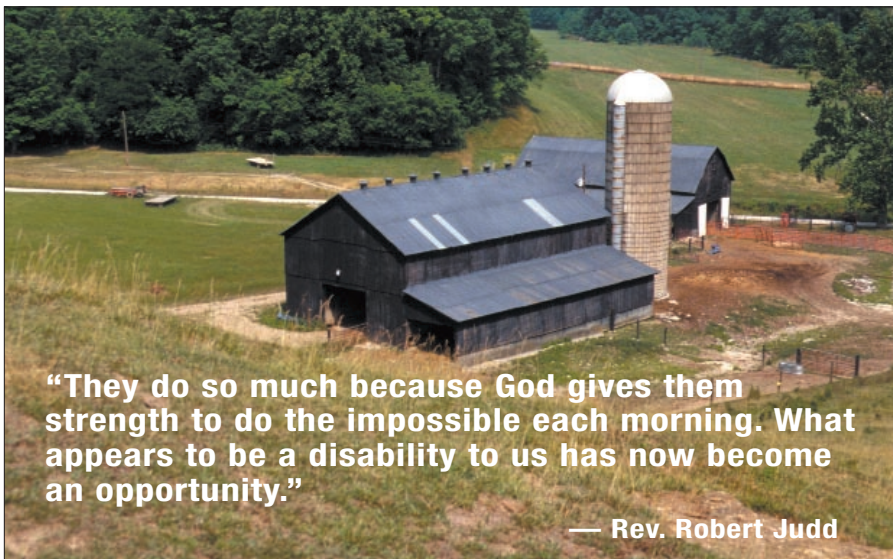
and day-to-day management.

"She went from housewife to farmer," Dennis says. "She's given up her house, because all of her time is spent outside. She's always taken a lot of pride in how her home looked, both inside and out."

More than once Emily has wondered if she could make it through another day. "I don't know what I would do if I didn't have



Dennis' blindness has required an adjustment in roles at Twin Creek. Son Shawn (left) moved to a college closer to home to help Emily assume the day-to-day operation of the farm. Dennis adjusted to doing more of the recordkeeping and housework. Chad Mattingly (right) has joined the effort, showing the Gibsons' cattle to help market their herd.



“They do so much because God gives them strength to do the impossible each morning. What appears to be a disability to us has now become an opportunity.”

— Rev. Robert Judd

the Lord in my life,” she says. “There would be no way I could get out of bed and do what I do. Some days it’s just hard to lift three buckets of feed.”

Dennis misses his role outside but is thankful he is able to help Emily with some of the inside chores. After Dennis became blind, he took an independent-living class from the Kentucky Department of the Blind. Representatives from the department came out to the farm to help modify their home.

“Now I am the one who makes the bed, does the laundry and vacuums the house,”

he says. “It’s not what I pictured myself doing at 45 years of age, but it’s what I have to do. It keeps me busy.”

Shawn continues to help his mother with the outside chores, farms the family’s 197 acres of tobacco and hay, and manages the upkeep of the equipment.

Switching places has been a slow process. In many ways Dennis is starting all over. He’s learned how to do all of those things that people take for granted — getting a drink of water, talking on the telephone, using the microwave.

While making this major life adjustment,

the Gibsons find humor in many of Dennis’ new “learning” experiences — from the first time he ran into the electric fence to the many times he’s opened peas instead of peaches.

“He’s opened so many cans of peas,” Emily laughs. “The worst part of it all is that he can’t eat them very well because they roll around on his plate too much!”

Although it’s easy for Dennis and Emily to get frustrated with the new changes they’ve had to make, it’s worth it.

“It just takes patience,” Emily says. “For example, Dennis still remembers how to fix his machinery; it just takes him a little longer to do it. Sometimes he reaches for a wrench, and you have to move his hand to show him where the wrench is.”

Every year it becomes easier for Dennis to work around the farm. He runs the head gate while Emily and Shawn vaccinate cattle. He even sharpens the lawnmower blades.

“I don’t know what I’d do without him,” Shawn, now 25, says. “When I was a kid, I never wanted to listen to Dad tell me how to run things on the farm. I gave him the excuse that I would learn later. Well, later got up on me sooner than I expected.”

■ New insight

Dennis understands that he can’t help in the ways that he used to. “But I also feel that

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The Gibsons' goal is to focus on using cattle with nationally known and respected pedigrees to create a high-quality herd using proven AI sires.

they still need me," he says. "I am a part of this farm. I can still visualize how things need to be done from my memory and help them when they need to think through projects."

Though Dennis has lost such a precious sense, his other instincts have intensified. Now his hearing, touch and smell have become his way to "see."

"I still see," Dennis says. "It's just not the way everybody else sees. ... I'm blessed to know what it's like to see. I know what colors are. I know the beauty of seeing one of my cows grazing on the green hillsides. I guess you can look at it different ways."

When the cattle come through the chutes at weaning, he literally handles each new calf. This is now the way Dennis "sees" his herd.

■ A true appreciation

Dennis is thankful for the love and support he receives from his wife and realizes the burden she helps him bear.

"It's hard to love a blind man," Dennis

says. "If you don't believe me, then look at the number of recently divorced blind people I was around at the Kentucky Department of the Blind. Out of a group of 40 people, I was the only married one. Everyone else had been recently divorced."

Emily understands why these couples divorced. "It's hard," she says. "Some days I wonder how much more of it I can take. Dennis was very angry when he became blind. His moods were hard to predict."

The doctors say mood swings and depression are common. These patients are living in a new world, which can often make them feel alone and helpless.

"It gets lonely," Dennis says. "People around you change. People I thought were my friends don't visit anymore and act like I have the plague. They forget that I'm the same Dennis I was when I had vision."

Last January Dennis and Emily were selling cattle at the Central Kentucky Angus Association Winter Sale in Danville. That night a young boy spooked a cow as Emily was exiting the wash rack. The cow threw

Emily into the air, and she landed on the concrete floor.

"I could hear her screaming," Dennis says. "The hardest thing in the world for me was to listen to my Emily scream and not be able to help her. I was totally helpless. It's a fear no man can ever imagine."

Karen Burton says it was a terrifying situation. "The only thing Emily cared about that night was Dennis," Karen says. "Emily was injured very bad, but she wouldn't get into the ambulance until Dennis was right there beside her. She didn't want anything to happen to him."

The Gibsons are an inspiration to many. "There are so many days that I get frustrated," says the Rev. Robert Judd, Bradfordsville Baptist Church. "Each time I feel like quitting, I look at them and wonder how I could even think about it."

Every day the Gibsons accomplish impossible feats, he adds. "I know the hours they spend on their knees before God. They do so much because God gives them strength to do the impossible each morning. What appears to be a disability to us has now become an opportunity."

■ Looking to the future

For Dennis, the future is uncertain. He has been in remission for almost two years. Once Wegener's goes into remission, however, it can come back twice as strong. The doctors say Wegener's can progress undetected and can resurface in the most severe stage.

"All you can do is live each day to the fullest as if tomorrow will be there," Dennis says. "I'll keep looking for tomorrow. Because this blind man will see someday, even though it may not be on this earth."

Life will always have mountains and valleys. Joe Burton says, "The Gibsons have gone through the bottom of the valley, and never once did they let it be known that they were at the bottom."

True examples to all Angus breeders, Dennis and Emily Gibson have faced adversity and made the best out of every situation. With Emily's eyes and hands and Dennis' mind and encouragement, they are ready to tackle what tomorrow may bring. "One of the most beautiful things on earth is to watch Emily stand out in a pasture and describe the cattle to Dennis," Karen Burton says.

Judd agrees and adds, "A love like theirs should be everyone's goal. That's what life is supposed to be about."