

# *Blogging with a mission*

*A look at the influence that blogger and Westwood resident David Atkins has had on getting residents involved in the inner workings of their hometown*

*By Bret Silverberg  
Photos by Greg Abazorius*



The tasks of a man with the job title “technical operations manager” at a small Internet startup are pretty much what you would expect: make sure the servers are functional, troubleshoot the network when it goes down and even help take out the trash at times. David Atkins, a 41-year-old Westwood resident and self-proclaimed “jack of all trades,” has just such a gig. But hidden underneath Atkins’ technological know-how is the soul of a writer; a creative, thoughtful and pensive man who enjoys sitting down at the computer to sort through technical difficulties just as much as he loves penning pieces about Westwood Station or biking to work.

As a creative outlet, Atkins blogs- he blogs about everything

from religion to local and national government and diversity within the community. His writing wanders everywhere from the deeply cerebral to, say, a tongue-in-cheek musing about coffee’s relationship to the trees of the Pacific Northwest.

Atkins, with two blogs in tow, one that deals with Westwood town issues (appropriately named *Westwood Blog*) and one that is more of the personal variety (dubbed *Dave Writes*), says he isn’t in it for the high-profile status one can amass rather quickly these days with a solid fan base, he just wants to get people talking about town issues.

“(Westwood Blog is) a little different from a regular blog,” Atkins says over coffee at the of-



Westwood resident, blogger and avid biker, David Atkins

office of Spire.com, the Internet company for which Atkins works, based in the financial district of Boston. “I’m just using

that mechanism as a way to start a conversation.”

Unlike bloggers who pour their souls into online journals,

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**From left to right: Jason and David Atkins in the backyard of their Westwood home**

Atkins, who has been a resident in town for just under three years, tries not to take a side. He simply presents information on topics affecting Westwood residents, from all of the controversy surrounding Westwood Station to ideas for making the town more pedestrian-friendly. Above all, Atkins just wants everyone to be informed of the issues at hand.

“I’m just trying to be objective. Not necessarily neutral all the time,” he explains. “Generally, I’m not going to try to manipulate the conversation to my point of view. I’m trying to be an editor.”

Writing comes naturally to Atkins, a man whose resume far exceeds that of the typical computer technologies expert. Atkins studied at MIT, and earned a J.D. at Seattle University in Tacoma, Washington, where he found time to write for the law school’s newspaper. His resume reads more like the background of a lawyer or a journalist, than a technologies man, which is why he went searching for different outlets to pursue his love for writing. *Dave Writes* allows him to

exercise his knack for creative writing, whereas *Westwood Blog* grants him the opportunity to practice his skill, as a reporter.

“The whole reason I started (this) is I want to be a writer,” recalls Atkins of his personal blog. “This is more opinion stuff.”

Both blogs also afford him the chance to test himself in the relatively unstable waters of the writing industry without having to risk a career change in unstable economic times.

“I kept running into that, ‘Well, what am I going to do to get from a relatively stable job to freelancing or something,’” he says. “I’m 41 with three kids.”

While writing may not be his full-time occupation, Atkins has gained a certain level of fame from both of his blogs. He estimates that about 500 to 1,000 people have viewed his *Westwood Blog*, a journal that serves up a variety of relevant town issues.

Atkins’ work came into the spotlight last spring, when during the height of the political season in Westwood, *Westwood Blog*

served as a forum for lively debate over the hotly contested selectmen’s race. Atkins provided extensive background information on all four candidates through downloadable podcasts (a first in Westwood), in addition to moderating a lively discussion on the blog’s message board about where each candidate stood on the issues.

Since last spring, *Westwood Blog* has remained at the forefront of local politics, presenting breaking information on everything from the Wegmans liquor license controversy to Westwood Station traffic mitigation negotiations. All of this he does for free, driven to report by his passion for providing information and being involved in his hometown.

Despite the informative tone of *Westwood Blog*, Atkins has found himself defending his writing. In one of his posts, dated September 29, 2008, he supports the art of blogging with a dated cartoon from the *New York Times* depicting two dogs, one saying to the other, “I had my own blog for a while, but I decided to go back to just pointless, incessant barking.”

In the post, Atkins immediately takes umbrage to this comment, pointing out that this was the early days of blogging and things have decidedly changed. These days, blogs can be used as an actual resource, especially if the blogger is someone in the know, something *Westwood Blog* is a living example of.

*Westwood Blog*, however, varies greatly from his personal online blog, which is chalk full of his musings and reflections. *Dave Writes* serves more as a looking-glass view into the life of David Atkins. Together, *Westwood Blog* and *Dave Writer* provide for a “creative life” that this computer man thrives off of.

“*Dave Writes* is more about...life,” relates Atkins, struggling to find the words. “I call it a ‘creative life,’ where you’re blending work, and community involvement and personal life together.”

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Sounds like something right out of the Transcendentalist movement, and it's not actually that far off. Much of what Atkins writes about involves the changing shape of Boston, nature and even a post on the writing process itself.

When asked if he would ever consider writing a book, Atkins hesitates.

"You start blogging, you start commenting on other people's sites, you start emailing each other...it builds momentum," he says. "So you get a book deal. Maybe you get an advance for \$2,000 to write something. That's just what you should be doing...Writing one book is not going to make your life."

A book may or may not be on the horizon, but for right now, it's just the issues that count for



*The Atkins family moved to Westwood three years ago; pictured above are Jen and David and their children Sharon, Marshall and Jason*

Atkins. And in Westwood, what better story is there to write about than Westwood Station?

"I think that there is a story in Westwood Station," muses Atkins. "A big story, not just

about the mechanics. I think there's a story about how the community deals with it. It's not just about a few people opposing a development in their neighborhood. It's about how does the town grow?"

Atkins is a refreshing twist on an old model. In a society where blogs are often viewed more as personal diaries than as news sources, Atkins has broken the mold, using his two cents to urge the masses to seek out more information and become involved in the inner dealings and workings of their hometown. At the same time, he also realizes that his job isn't done until he has

*Atkins offers a tour through Westwood Blog, an online journal dedicated to presenting information on all things Westwood*



*Outside of blogging, Atkins' other passion is biking; here he poses with his collection of bikes*

taken his own advice.

“You can't just go out there and write about some topic when you have no background,” says Atkins with a laugh. “You have to be someone who has a platform, a reputation, where people want to hear what you have to say.”

Want to check Atkins' work out for yourself? Check out <http://westwoodblog.org/node> or <http://blog.davewrites.com/index.php>. ■



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