

When Andy Holder was a boy, he dreamed of a life filled with “grand things and extraordinary accomplishments.” But he never imagined that diabetes would be the catalyst. By age 36, Holder was a happily married husband and father, making a good living working as an investment adviser, a job he liked but didn’t love. His doctor diagnosed him with diabetes during a routine health exam.

“People get caught up in wasting their time and energy worrying about things they can’t control. The only thing you can control every day is your attitude.”

“I was waiting for something and I realized this was it,” Holder says. “Somehow I was going to use this disease to change my life and fulfill those aspirations.”

Holder has Type 1 diabetes, an autoimmune disorder sometimes referred to as juvenile diabetes, though one doesn’t have to be a child to get it. The immune system destroys insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. Insulin is needed to control blood-sugar levels, which, if too high or too low, can be life-threatening.

“I wear an insulin pump with a catheter that’s inserted into my abdomen and I have to change out the cartridge and reinsert a new catheter every three days,” Holder explains. “Another device pricks blood from my fingertips to check blood-sugar levels. I’m counting every carbohydrate I consume and trying to balance that with activity and daily life. It’s a never-ending, oftentimes mind-numbing assault.”

Holder decided he would fight back. One way to do that would be to reach his goal of finishing an Ironman. The first step would be to learn how to swim at the local YMCA. It was harder than he expected. Holder swallowed a lot of water initially and would then hyperventilate. It was a struggle just to swim 25 yards. Over time, though, triathlon training helped him manage his blood sugar and nutrition.

“I thought, if I can pull off an Ironman race with diabetes and juggling a family



ANDY HOLDER

Lives in: Pennsylvania

Age: 43

Diagnosed with: Type 1 diabetes

and not knowing how to swim, that’s something that would inspire others,” he says. “I wanted to use my story to raise awareness of diabetes.”

In 2006, Holder finished his first Ironman at Lake Placid. To date, he has completed seven Ironman races and he’s known as “Iron Andy.” During the cycling leg of a triathlon, Holder juggles a lancing device, a vial of test strips and a blood-sugar meter on his handlebars. He must test his blood-sugar levels 30 to 70 times during a race. When the “Why me?” thoughts enter his mind, Holder pushes them aside.

“People get caught up in wasting their time and energy worrying about things they can’t control,” he says. “The only thing you can control every day is your attitude. I know that doesn’t make pain go away and it doesn’t change a lot of things, but that’s how I’m trying to live my life.”

Now in his fifth year as the national spokesman for Good Neighbor Pharmacy, Holder leads a campaign to educate people about the importance of a pharmacist for people with a chronic disease. And in 2009, Holder launched the Iron Andy Foundation (ironandyfoundation.org), a nonprofit that assists families coping with diabetes.

“I’m changing lives,” he says.