

StoryCorps interview at Cecil County Public Library

In October 2011, U.S. Army Veteran Thomas Cousar was homeless, unemployed, and living in a tent in the woods. After receiving initial medical help from the Perry Point VA Medical Center, a turning point in Thomas' story came when he visited the Cecil County Public Library in 2012.

He worked with librarians there to gain vital computer skills and to apply for jobs online. Using the skills he'd acquired through the library's classes, Thomas found employment at Perry Point and now works there as a Peer Support Specialist.

Thomas works with other veterans enrolled in the same program he completed, driving them regularly to the Cecil County Public Library for computer skills and technology training courses so that they, too, can succeed. When CCPL accepted the National Medal at the White House, Thomas attended as CCPL's community representative.

Here Thomas talks to librarian Kathy Galbreath about what inspired him to turn his life around.

Kathy Galbreath: Talk a little about how you got to this place today. What was your pathway?

Thomas Cousar: The pathway, the beginning of it, was a sunrise. I'm from South Carolina, I've seen many sunrises and they're all beautiful. But this particular morning, was something really, really different about that sunrise. It seemed like I got warm inside, and it made me look around. And all of a sudden, I could see very clearly and I saw the tent that I was in. Why am I here with this tent? And I said, it's time for me to go find some help, find some way to come up out of this.

That was the morning that I caught a bus, and had no money. I told the bus driver, "I want to go to the VA." He said, "Sure, get on." That was my beginning to feeling really good that I could get things done now.

At Perryville library, I received my first email address—never worked on a computer. I said, where have I been? And so I just kept on working at it and learning things.

KG: It's empowering, though!

TS: Oh my goodness. I'm only 5'9", felt like I was 6'2"! I had a whole lot of power! That gave me an opportunity, I started volunteering, helping vets out, you know, talking with them, see how I could aid and assist them in getting what they needed. And after a year, I was hired as a Peer Support Specialist. So I was really blessed.

KG: You have always faced all the challenges that come at you head-on. That's what makes you so good at your job. Because you are able to talk to people because you've been there. And I love the way that you interact with the guys who come into the library.

TC: I've created a book. It gives them the bus schedule, it gives them where they can get food stamps, and unemployment agency—everything is in this big, big notebook. I said, "Go ahead and look through that, and find out where you need to go."

KG: Well you're giving them what they need to succeed. You're going that little extra step, which is what you always do. You always go that little extra step.

TC: It's rewarding to me. And I really, really enjoy what I do—I mean, I really do.

KG: And I just know that you do everything that you can to make it a good day for everybody who comes in that library when they come in with you. And I know they appreciate it, too, because they've told me.

TC: But I have to thank you for being there.

KG: And I thank you for your service. And for everything you do for everybody else.