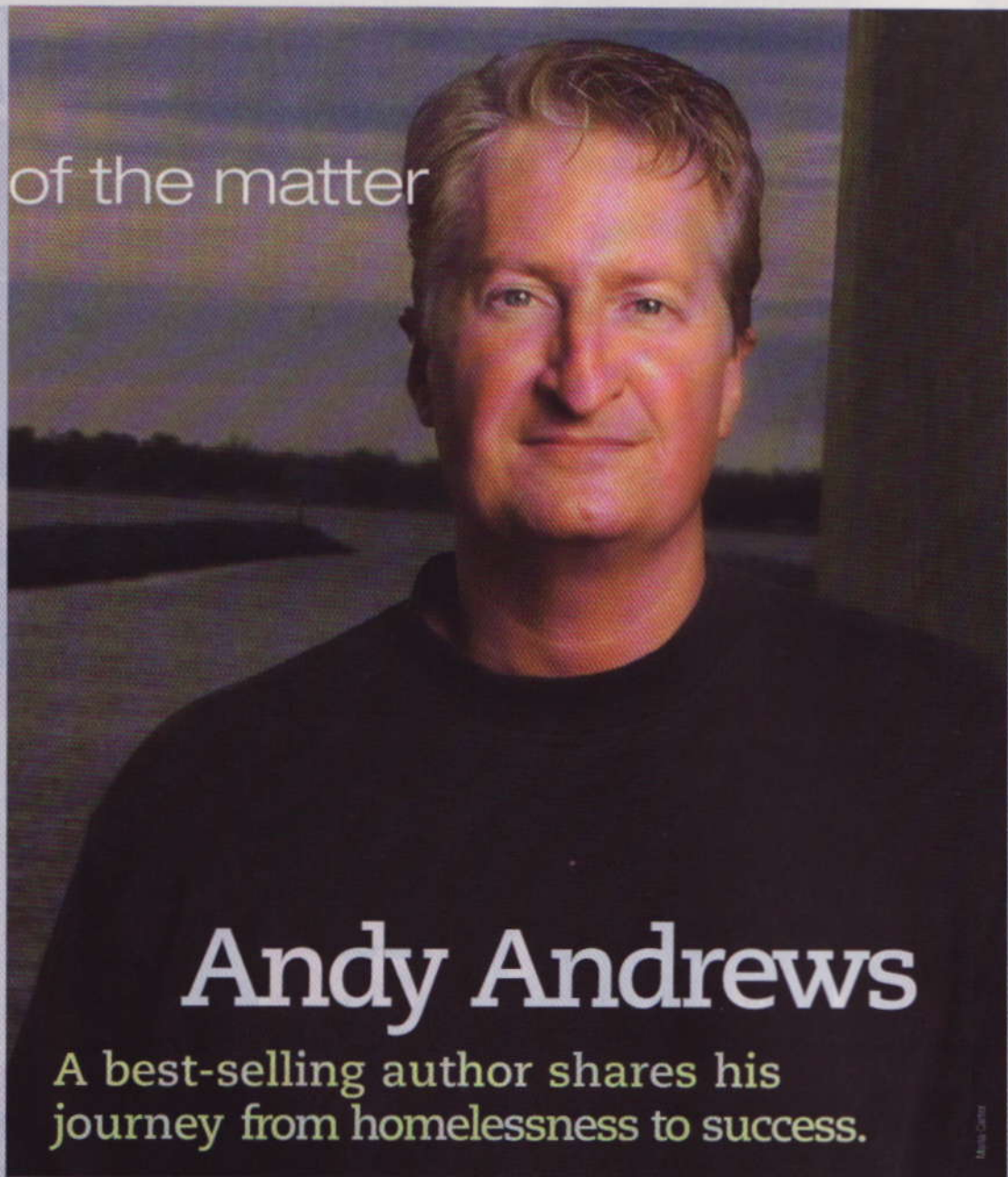


# heart of the matter

BY TORI TAFF



## Andy Andrews

A best-selling author shares his journey from homelessness to success.

It is impossible not to like Andy Andrews. It probably doesn't hurt that he looks startlingly like a grown-up version of Opie Taylor from *Mayberry*, but the truth is the best-selling author and internationally known speaker is just a genuinely nice guy—friendly, funny and kind. Even the not-easily-impressed *New York Times* hailed him as a “modern-day Will Rogers who has quietly become one of the most influential people in America.”

Homecoming audiences were introduced to Andy Andrews after his first book, *The Traveler's Gift*, made such an impression on Bill Gaither that he tracked Andy down by phone just to tell him. An instant friendship was formed and today Andy calls Bill and Gloria “two of the most influential people in my life.” So when *Homecoming Magazine* joined CNN, “Good Morning America,” Fox News and apparently every other media outlet in the free world clamoring to interview Andy in

the wake of the release of his brand new book, *The Noticer*, I was grateful but not surprised at his prompt response. Andy waves away my thanks with a smile and says, “Hey, my motto is ‘Whatever the Gaithers ask me to do, the answer is always yes!’”

Not only is Andy a willing interview subject, he has also done his homework. He begins by saying, “I know the theme of this issue is work, and I know exactly what God has put on my heart to share with your readers!” He settles in and says enthusiastically, “OK, you know how for years we've heard ‘Don't sweat the small stuff?’ Well, lately I've been thinking that maybe as a nation we have ignored some of the small stuff we should have been paying attention to. We make lots of little choices every day, and they're like small brushstrokes that we are painting on the canvas of our lives. Then one day after maybe 30 years or so, we step back and take a look at the big picture that we've created for our neighborhoods, our govern-

ment and our children and say, 'I'm not sure this is what we intended.' We have to realize that the small stuff matters, that these brushstrokes, these little choices that we're allowed to make every day can either create a masterpiece, which is the life that God intends for us, or they can cause us to miss the mark."

Andy is just getting warmed up. "I'll tell you why that's important to me," he says. "When I was 19, my parents both died and I started drifting through my life, making bad decisions and ended up homeless. *The Noticer* is about this man called Jones that I actually met when I was living under a pier in Orange Beach, Alabama. I go on to create a story using Jones as a character, but that first chapter is absolutely true." He continues, "Now there is definitely a chronic homeless population that suffers from mental problems or addictions, but there are also people who are willing to work, but for whatever reason have found themselves economically distraught. That was me. When I met Jones, I was working—I caught fish, cleaned them, sold bait and washed boats. But when I wasn't doing that I tended to stay under the pier or walk the beach aimlessly by myself."

The press has become particularly fascinated with this aspect of Andy's story. "Since that's in my background, and since there are more people becoming homeless these days than ever before, the interviewers are always asking me, 'How did you get out from under that pier? Did you snap your fingers; did God reach down and sprinkle fairy dust on you? What specifically did you do?' And I've just realized that maybe one of the small things Jones taught me, one of his little brushstrokes of wisdom just might be the advice that our nation needs, not only to help these people, but to become a country that is no longer culturally, racially and economically divided. So here is the answer! You ready?" Andy smiles expectantly. "The old man told me, 'When you don't know what to do—do something!'"

He pauses to let that sink in. "Jones said, 'Andy, you're working jobs but you're also sitting around here for hours every day doing nothing. I know you don't know exactly what to do to make things better for yourself, but I'm telling you right now, do something. Buddy, do you know how to read? There are people out here who can't, so go read to them. You've got a strong young back. There

are people out here who can't carry anything any more. Go carry stuff for them. A lawn needs mowing? Go mow it. If you see something that needs doing in your community, go do it.' Jones told me that because of all that



had happened to me, I had isolated myself and spent so much time alone that I had started doubting the value that God had placed on my life. He said the way to stop feeling worthless was to get out and start doing something that would prove my value as a human being, first to myself and then to others. That would help me become a person other people wanted to be around, and with that would come encouragement and opportunities that I would never get just sitting around doing nothing."

Andy took Jones at his word. He started looking around Orange Beach for things that needed fixing and people that needed helping. He started offering advice on the one thing he knew he could do well—fishing. "You know, there are wealthy people out there, connected people who have big jobs but they don't know how to fish," Andy says. "I found people who were grateful for the skills I had, even though I didn't place much value on them at the time, and I did everything I could to help them catch fish. I started having conversations with them because

they liked my attitude, and they gave me good advice and counsel, which led to better jobs, which is how I eventually got out from under the pier. But it all began when Jones told me that there *was* something I could do—I could do something!"

Those perfectly-timed words eventually helped define Andy Andrews' calling and career. He continues to write best-selling books—*The Noticer* entered the *NY Times* Bestseller List at #6. He speaks encouragement and motivation into the lives of presidents, corporate CEO's and major sports figures. He and his wife Polly still live in Orange Beach, where they are happily raising their two young sons.

Andy's never forgotten the lessons he learned on his journey from homelessness to success. "Without acceptance of the messenger, nobody will ever hear the message," Andy says. "I work hard to become someone that other people want to be around, so that they will listen when the time comes for me to speak." He ends our conversation with these words: "People think that it takes forever to change, but it does not. Sometimes it takes forever for us to prepare to change, but change happens immediately. When you hear the truth, when you find God's answer for your questions, I believe that you will know it—and everything in your life can shift just like that!"



With Bob Hope in Mr. Hope's backyard



With President Ronald Reagan



Tori Taff is an author, speaker and Grammy-nominated songwriter. She and her husband Russ Taff live in

Brentwood, Tenn. with their daughters Madi Rose and Charlotte. Tori writes about life with a gospel singer, two teenagers and three yappy dogs at her blog: [www.Babybloomr.com](http://www.Babybloomr.com).