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HOMELESS TEEN BECOMES ONE OF AMERICA'S GREATEST INFLUENCERS

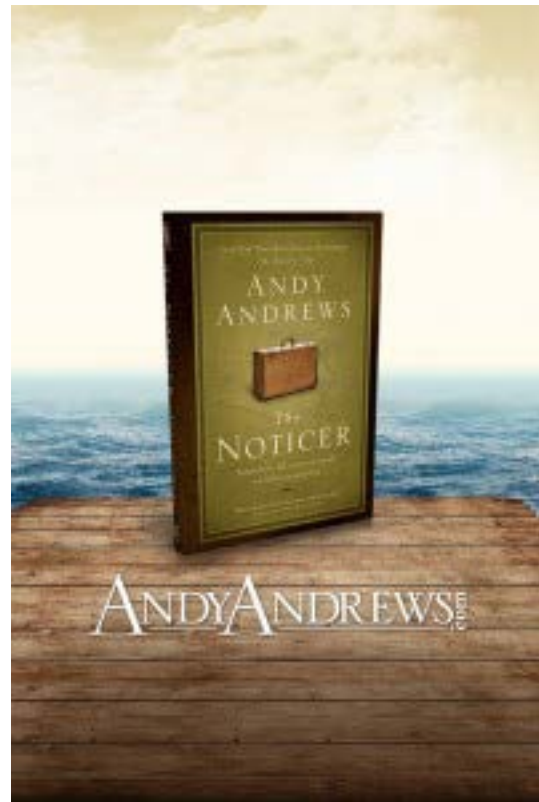
By Tami Nantz May 4, 2016

[Andy Andrews](#) dug a hole for himself — literally and figuratively. As he tried to make himself comfortable in his hollow beneath the Gulf State Park Pier in Gulf Shores, Alabama, it's safe to say he never once dreamed the *New York Times* would one day hail him as one of America's great influencers.

Andrews was born and raised in Alabama, and lost both his parents at a young age. He was only 19 years old when his mother succumbed to cancer. His father was killed in a car accident only a few months later. Reeling from that loss and what he saw as his “abandonment,” life changed drastically for Andrews.

“I've always had the ability to take a bad situation and make it worse,” Andrews told Opportunity Lives. “So I did. I made some bad choices and ended up literally homeless and living under a pier on the Gulf Coast and in and out of people's garages — which is not safe or smart — but

Without a home, a steady job or a vehicle, Andrews lived under the pier. He bathed by swimming himself clean in hotel pools or showering at the beach.



He earned money doing odd jobs cleaning fish or selling bait to tourists, and often found food left in the garage refrigerators and freezers of empty vacation homes. During the winter, those same garage appliances provided heat when he positioned himself just right on the floor. Life wasn't easy and prospects were dim.

What unfolded next is chronicled in the first chapter of his 2009 *New York Times* bestseller, "The Noticer." Andrews, who was 23 at the time, was settling in for the night in his spot under the pier when an old man found him and introduced himself as "Jones." Startled and a bit hesitant, an unsuspecting Andrews shook the man's hand — and began a relationship that would completely reshape his life.

Andrews and Jones talked a good long while that night, and as Jones turned to leave, he handed three books to Andrews and asked him to read them. They were biographies — "adventure stories," the old man said — of Winston Churchill, George Washington Carver and Will Rogers.

"Remember, young man," Jones told Andrews as he walked away, "experience is not the best teacher. *Other* people's experience is the best teacher. By reading about the lives of great people, you can unlock the secrets to what made them great."

That advice would turn out to be perhaps the most valuable of Andy Andrews' life. Until then, he'd wondered if life was just a lottery ticket, or if there were decisions he could make that would direct his future?

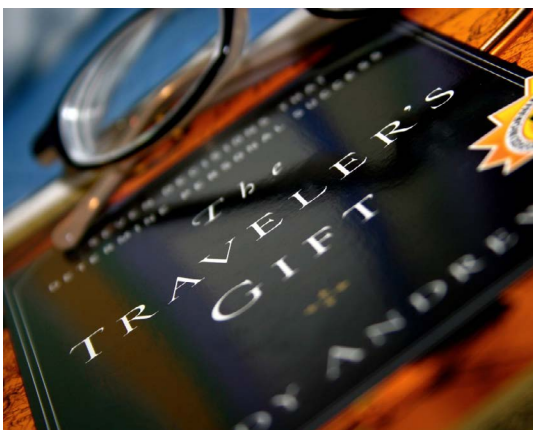
He didn't just read those first three "adventure stories," he practically devoured them. Jones delivered three more books — biographies of Joan of Arc, Abraham Lincoln and Viktor Frankl. Andrews found a note tucked neatly inside the Frankl book that said simply, "I'm proud of you."

It brought tears. It had been a long time since anyone had said they were proud of him.

The next three books were about Harry Truman, Florence Nightingale and King David. The next, Harriet Tubman, Queen Elizabeth I and John Adams, then Eleanor Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and Joshua Chamberlain. In all, Andrews read more than 200 biographies under the pier. As he read, he began to scour each book for similarities. What made these men and women successful? What qualities did they possess that he lacked?

All that reading ignited a fire in Andrews. For the first time, he says he felt like he had something to say that would help others. Long before he ever felt compelled to put words to paper, his life's mission became "to help other people live the lives that they would live if they only knew how to do it."

As Andrews read the biographies, he connected the dots in his mind, and before long, the list he now calls "[The Seven Decisions](#)" was created. This list eventually became the basis of "[The Traveler's Gift](#)," a book he submitted to publishers 51 times before it was finally published in 2002. It became his first *New York Times* bestseller.



Still Andy's best selling work, "[The Traveler's Gift](#)" remained on the *Times*' bestseller's list for four and a half months, and was one of "Good Morning America's" book-of-the-month selections in 2003.

Now printed in over 40 languages, it tells the story of a man who faces a great deal of adversity in his life, and travels back in time to meet seven different historical figures who are also facing tough challenges — people like Anne Frank, Abraham Lincoln and Christopher Columbus. Each of them explain a different principle to him that, if applied, will ensure success in life.

The seven decisions Andrews discovered as he mined the content of those 200 biographies were life changing for him. He would go on to author 26 books, including a third *Times* bestseller, “[How Do You Kill 11 Million People?](#)” (2012) — a book that brilliantly answers the question its title poses, and issues a stern wake up call to voters on both sides of the political aisle. He met and married Polly, his wife of 27 years, and together they have two sons, Austin and Adam. He became a world-renowned storyteller, has spoken at the request of four U.S. presidents, and toured military bases around the world to share his principles at the invitation of the Department of Defense. He routinely speaks to sports teams, corporations and civic groups, sharing the principles he’s learned over the course of his life, and — given that he was twice named “Comedian of the Year” by over 1,000 colleges in the 1980s — it should come as no surprise that he always adds a bit of humor.

Years ago, when Andrews met Jones under the pier, he says the old man told him something that stuck with him. He was mad about his circumstances, and maybe having just a bit of a pity party. Jones, ever the encourager, said: “Andy, I have a feeling this is exactly where you’re supposed to be right how.”

That made him mad, so he asked Jones why he would say such a thing.

“Sometimes you just have to slow down and think,” Jones explained. “And boy, you’re living under a pier. You can’t do anything *but* slow down and think things through. Son, as you lay your head down tonight, I know you think you’re sleeping on sand...but I believe you’re sleeping on fertile ground.”

How true it was. What if Andy Andrews, one of America’s great storytellers and influencers, hadn’t been under that pier that night when the old man came walking by? Yet he was, and — like one of his seven decisions so eloquently says — he *persisted without exception*. Andy Andrews found a way where there was no way, and in doing so, has overcome the greatest of odds and is living the American dream.

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