

Coming Full Circle

For inspirational author and speaker Andy Andrews, the Gulf State Park Pier holds a special place in his heart.

Andy Andrews's adult life effectively had come full circle when the Gulf State Park Pier reopened to great fanfare in the summer of 2009.



The comedian/inspirational author, who has been on every best-seller list in the world, has had a lifelong connection with the pier, although the structure that now juts 1,540 feet proudly into the Gulf of Mexico played vastly different roles during his lifetime. His earliest recollection of Gulf State Park Pier was on family trips to the coast. His pier experiences run the gamut from the sheer pleasure of fishing to shelter from the wind and weather.

Above: Andy Andrews, right, shakes hands with Alabama State Parks Director Mark Easterwood during the grand opening of the new Gulf State Park Pier in August 2009.

"Growing up, we stayed at Bon Secour because we didn't have enough money to stay at the beach," said Andrews, who called Birmingham, Dothan and Montgomery home during his formative years. "Actually, we didn't have enough money to stay at the river. We stayed on a canal that was dug off the river. We stayed at Campbell's Bon Secour Resort.

"My greatest memories of my family's life was coming down here and getting to fish off the State Pier."

After Hurricane Ivan washed away the pier that had been so familiar to Andrews, a new, longer, much-improved pier emerged from the sugar-white sands in Gulf Shores. Gov. Bob Riley celebrated the opening with many other dignitaries, including Andrews, who brought his two sons to the opening. "I'm bringing the boys to the pier and they are just beginning to understand - 'Daddy used to sleep under here?' So it was funny when they were here that day with Gov. Riley. You had the governor and the guy who slept under the pier," Andrews laughed.

Slept under the pier? Yep, fate had body-slammed Andrews face down in the sand. The pier became his place of refuge and sustenance.

PLACE OF REFUGE

When he was 19 tragedy sent Andrews into a tailspin. His mother died of cancer and his father was killed in a car wreck. He admits he was not prepared for life without their guidance.

"I then made a series of bad decisions," he said. "None of them had anything to do with alcohol or drugs and none of them were particularly horrible. It was just a bunch of them in a row and they were more economic than anything else. I had a lot of pride. I had left school. People said I was going to run my life into the ground, and I had. I didn't really tell anybody, but it got worse and worse.

"When my daddy died in the car wreck, being the financial genius that I was, I took the insurance money and bought a mobile home with it – the entire amount. It never occurred to me that I would have to pay somebody to put it somewhere. I found an old man who let me put it on his property in Bon Secour. So I lived down here. I had a car and I had odd jobs. I got behind financially and had to sell the trailer."

Andrews was then down to a car and a tent. Soon the car was replaced by a motorcycle, which also was eventually sold. He could pitch his tent at a couple of campgrounds for \$5 a night, but that soon became too expensive, as well.

"I got tired of paying \$5 to put up my tent, so I ducked under the pier to save the \$5," he said. "Then it was all concrete where it met the sand and the wind had kind of hollowed it out. So I helped it along and hollowed it out even more. There were sea oats along the sides of the pier and people couldn't see me going in and out. I had a place underneath there that was a lot bigger than the tent and it was just as dry as the tent. Mr. Falk was running the pier back then. I never really knew if he knew I was under there. He would always turn people toward me. If somebody needed fish cleaned, he'd say, 'That boy over there will clean your fish.' So I'd clean the fish and they give me \$5 or something. I'd stay with friends in Mobile occasionally. When it got cold I'd duck in a garage around here."

Of course, the Alabama Gulf Coast looked much different back then with basically the entire town situated between the pier and what is now The Hangout. Andrews sold fish to make a few bucks and people in the area would lend a helping hand.

"Nancy at Sea & Suds would fry my fish for a dollar," he said. "For that dollar I'd get all the iced tea I could drink, all the hushpuppies I could eat and they'd fry my fish. I sold fish to the Holiday Inn. I sold bait to the tourists and I washed boats. I did whatever I could do. All that time, (singer/musician) Brent Burns would let me speak between his sets at



Andrews describes how he once lived under the Gulf State Park pier.

the Holiday Inn. I was doing comedy work. I was going in saying, 'Hey I'm a comedian,' when really I was a kid living under a pier. In my mind, I was a comedian. Nobody around here had seen a comedian. The only comedian they'd ever seen was on TV, so they didn't have anything to compare me to. So they laughed a little bit and they encouraged me.

BECOMING AN AUTHOR

"What I really wanted to do was speak. I really wanted to tell people something. But I was also aware that in your 20s who wants to hear what you have to say? It was around that time, I met an old man who took me under his wing and he started giving me some principles and putting some harsh rules on me. He put some discipline on me that I hadn't had since my parents died. He taught me about self-discipline and taught me about how I should act. His name was Jones. He is the one who started me reading these books. I read over 200 biographies about these great, influential people. It created in me a wonder about where they came from and if they were born this way. Were they born this way or was it something they did? If it was something they did, what did they do and how long did it take them to do it? So I identified these seven things that years later became the seven decisions in the "Travelers' Gift," the first book I wrote."

His first book is a story about a time traveler named David Ponder who was going through a tough time. In his travels, he meets historical figures who were also going through tough times.

"He gets to be with these figures – Anne Frank in the

Annex – he gets to talk with her and question her; Harry Truman as he's trying to end the war; and Lincoln at Gettysburg," Andrews said. "They each had a different decision. These are the things that Jones had taught me, pointing out these decisions of these people in the biographies. After the success of 'The Traveler's Gift' and a couple of other books, I eventually wrote the book about Jones, 'The Noticer,' which was a New York Times best-seller. The first chapter of 'The Noticer' is true. The rest of it is kind of my imagination."

Obviously, there was significant time period between taking shelter under the pier and traveling the world for book signings and performing his comedy act.

OUT FROM UNDER THE PIER

"When I was 20-21, I would make two or three stops at the pier a day," Andrews said, while watching anglers on the pier land sheepshead and whiting with regularity. "Anybody need bait? Anybody need fish cleaned? Anybody have any fish they don't want that I can eat? I was pretty much a constant presence on the pier – the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night."

After honing his act between music sets at the Holiday Inn for a while, Andrews decided to get in touch with a buddy, Robert D. Smith, to see if he would be willing to help launch his career as a comedian.

"I'm telling everybody I'm a comedian and Robert's living up in somebody's garage in Birmingham," Andrews said. "But I was telling everybody he was my manager. He had actually graduated from college and he was trading yard work to be able to live in the garage apartment."

"We did everything back then. I remember coming up with clothes to go to the pawn shop to get \$25 to pay the bill for his phone in the garage. That was our lifeline to my career. Finally we got a call and a cruise line booked me as a comedian. So everybody is thinking I'm living down here, working as a comedian. Yeah, I'm working as a comedian once every three months and I'm living under the pier. But then they hear I've been booked on a cruise ship so they thought I had made the big time. I was getting \$300 on the cruise ship for the whole week. I was sending that money back to Robert in Birmingham. I kept \$25 and I had my cabin."

Andrews used his cruise ship time to make friends and use the life lessons that Jones had taught him. Smith, meanwhile, was using the money Andrews sent to make brochures and pay the phone bill.

"Pretty soon I'm making \$700 a week," he said. "I'm still sending it all back because I got to eat free and live free. I still didn't have a place to live. I spent nearly two years of my life on a cruise ship, so I really didn't need a place. When I came on land, I'd go stay with Robert. But I was effectively out from under the pier."

Then Smith started getting Andrews booked at colleges. Smith also discovered he was selling Andrews short. "Robert was booking me for \$200 a night and people were saying, hmmmm," Andrews said. "Then Robert raised the price to \$1,000 a night and people said OK. I guess at \$200 a night how good could I be? But at \$1,000 a night I must be pretty good. So now I'm actually doing some colleges and I meet

this girl (Polly, his wife of 23 years) in Mississippi. All she knows is I'm this fancy comedian who's getting on TV occasionally. She didn't know I didn't even own a home."

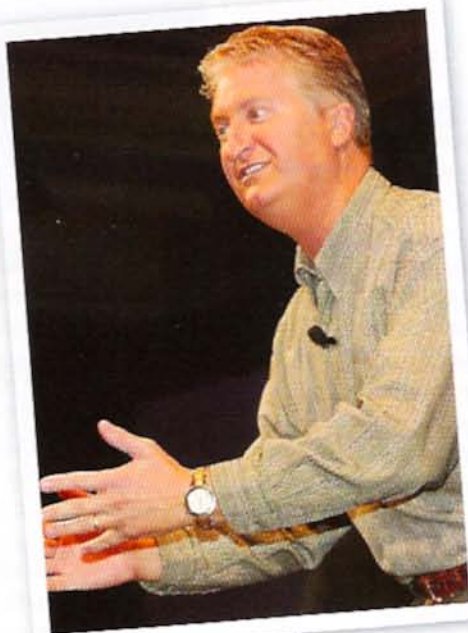
"I'm in love with this girl," he said. "I'm going to marry her. I'm like 28 or 29 years old. Robert and I looked at each other and said, 'You can't ask her daddy when you don't have a place to live.' So we bought another car and I bought a condo down here. It was a two-bedroom condo. But the bank turned me down at first. You have to show three years of income. I made \$50,000 one year, \$100,000 the next year and \$150,000 the next. But they turned me down because my income was too unstable. I'll never forget – Wade Ward stepped in for me. He said, 'Hey this guy has been busting it for years. He's got his nose on the grindstone and he's a

good kid.' Wade put his name out there and I got the loan.

"To this day, I've only owned one condo and one house. After three years in the condo, we bought our house on Ono Island before it got expensive."

Andrews' comedy act got its big break at the University of Alabama when he was booked as the opening act for Joan Rivers.

"Her career was really hot at the time – she was a guest host on the Tonight Show," Andrews said. "This was my first really big show. While I'm doing my 25 minutes before she came on, I look over and she's standing on the side of the



stage watching my act. A week later her people called Robert – her people called my people, so to speak. Anyway, I toured for two years with her. She took me to Caesar's Palace. She took me all over the world. I went from there to working with Kenny Rogers, then Garth Brooks and Randy Travis."

While touring with Kenny Rogers, Andrews and the singer were engaged in a conversation about their upbringings and how they'd developed their careers.

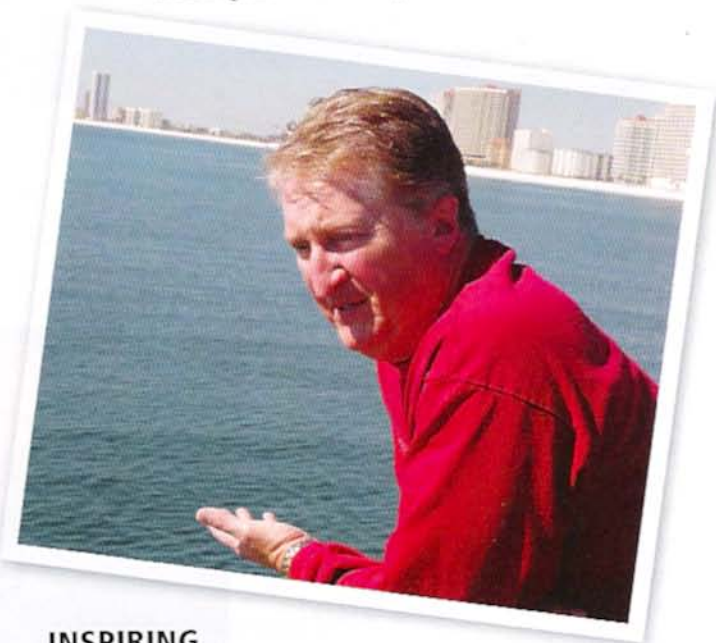
"He was telling me about living in a garage in Houston with 150 brothers and sisters or whatever it was," Andrews said. "I told him about living under the pier. I had never told anybody that because I was embarrassed. For years, I never told anybody I did that. But I told him about these seven things I had shaped my life around and someday I wanted to write a book about them. I would see people in these situations and I would think, 'Gosh, these people are not in as bad a situation as I was,' and they're stopped dead in their tracks. I was much worse than that and I came out of it. I knew that I could help these people.

"Kenny told me that night that I ought to start talking about these seven things on stage. I said 'Like in my comedy show?' He said, 'You're a talker. Just transition it into seriousness and then end with funny and you'll be fine.' Midway through the show, I started to talk about my story and talk about these principles. But I would tell about them in funny ways. People started coming up to me, saying, 'Man, I loved what you did. The serious part was my favorite.' That's usually not what a comedian wants to hear, but people started to call us and they wanted me to start coming to their company, their church, their organization. They wanted me to be funny, but they really wanted me to talk about these seven principles and how they can change your life. So I developed a speaking program about that. When I wrote the 'The Traveler's Gift' it was a comedian writing a serious book and nobody would publish it. I was turned down by about 50 publishers. Three years went by before it was published – by a publisher that had turned it down twice before. It went into the book store and sat there. It didn't do anything and the books got returned to the publisher. It was dead."

Regardless of the prospects, the ever-generous Andrews kept giving the book away to anyone who would take one. One of those books made it to the right place and his fortune as an author changed. "My accountant told me that I have given away over 14,000 'Traveler's Gift' books through the years," he said. "The book was dead, and one of these books made its way to 'Good Morning, America' and it was given to a new reporter, who had been at ESPN. It was Robin Roberts. I didn't know anything about this. They told us a month before that the book was going to be on the show. The publisher then had to convince the bookstores to take some of the books back after it had already failed. Robin Roberts

went on the air and talked about how the book had changed her life and that the book stayed on her bedside table. I sat in front of my little TV and watched that happen. By 2 o'clock that afternoon, every bookstore in America had sold out of them. So the book became a phenomenon. It's been published in 20 languages. It's been on every bestseller list – New York Times, Wall Street Journal.

"And yet, I can trace it all back to the time I spent under this pier."



INSPIRING THROUGH STORIES

Andrews, who admits writing is a task, will have a sequel to "The Traveler's Gift" that will be available soon. "The Final Summit" revives the David Ponder character in a book that follows his writing philosophy.

"What I try to do is take complicated things and put them in simple form to establish principles that they can build their families on, that they can build their finances on, that they can rebuild shattered lives," he said. "I pray every day that God will give me a way to explain things in a way that people can use them and embrace them in a way that will do them some good. I'm a dad. I'm a husband. Just because I know these things doesn't mean I'm great at them. I'm trying every day. I'm learning. I'm struggling every day to be the dad I should be, the husband I should be, the person in the community I should be. I feel like we're all in this together. I feel there are great things out there for us. Our country has gone through some crazy times, and I feel like we can learn some things together. Smart authors write non-fiction books. People like me have to write stories. I create stories that people who don't necessarily like to read will read. I pray to God

that I can take complicated things and make them simple through stories. So, that's what I do.

"I look back at that time, when in my life it looks like the worst thing that could have happened, has happened. My parents had died. I have no money. I have no home. I'm embarrassed. I'm so embarrassed that I wouldn't even ask people for help that would have helped me.

While I don't believe that God caused that, I do believe that God used that time to get my attention. At that time, I didn't have anything else to pay attention to but a few books and an old man who was willing to tell me the truth. It was during my worst time, a time I would have never chosen in a million years that turned out to be the very time that has created the rest of my life. So I want people to understand that even in your worst times, things will get better. We're all either coming out of a crisis, in a crisis or headed into a crisis. That's part of living on this planet."

Andrews used last year's epic oil spill as an example of how attitude makes all the difference when there appears to be nothing but doom and gloom on the horizon.

"While the oil spill this past summer may have looked like the worst thing that could ever happen, now it's easing up a little bit," he said. "We're seeing past it. We can always remember that in every lifeline, from birth to death, you can always go somewhere along that lifeline where things were the worst. And it's rarely near the end, which means that things got better. So we have to have some perspective on our lives. Because, as Jones told me, perspective brings calm. Calm leads to clear thinking. Clear thinking yields ideas. From ideas, we get answers. We're all in this together. We're just looking for a few answers, and we're going to get them together."

GIVING BACK

Andrews said his faith, although questioned at times, was never abandoned and has allowed him to prosper and give back.

"I was brought up with faith, although during my crazy times I doubted it," he said. "But I had reminders. Even in my worst times, I had to remember — have you ever had a day when you didn't have enough to eat; have you ever had a day that there wasn't shelter? It may have been the pier, but it was shelter. Anytime we get to worrying about things, God has the answer. Even in my darkest hours, I was given a proof of hope. A proof of hope is if you're still breathing. If we're still breathing, that means you're still here. If you're still here, that

means you haven't accomplished what you were put here to accomplish. If you haven't accomplished what you were put here to accomplish, that means your very purpose has not yet been fulfilled. If your purpose hasn't been fulfilled, that means the most important part of your life is ahead of you. It doesn't matter how old you are or how sick you, how broke you might be or how depressed you might feel. By virtue of the fact that you sit and breathe, there is more."

For Andrews, the way out of the darkness is action, any kind of action that is positive. "So now is the time that even though you don't know what to do, you do something. You don't know what to do, but when you do something it creates value. Go read for somebody. Go carry something for somebody. I'm not saying, go find somebody and say if you give me \$10 I'll mow your lawn. I'm saying go into your community and find things that need doing and do them. There may not be many jobs available, but there is a lot of work to be done. When we do something, all of a sudden, people assign us value. No longer are we this little bum sleeping under the pier. All of a sudden, people start

saying, 'Every time I see this kid he's helping somebody. Every time I see this kid he's fixing something. Every time I see this kid he's making something look better. Every time I see this kid he's smiling.' They place a value on you that hadn't been there before. People of value get help. People of value make friends. People of value get advice. People of value get job offers. People of value get new lives because they did something even when they didn't know what to do.

"It's the people who don't do something, that sit and whine and complain that they don't know what to do, that get no help and their lives get worse and worse."

THE PIER IS A REMINDER

And when the 51-year-old Andrews needs to remember the way it was, all he has to do is make the short trip to Gulf State Park Pier for a quick reminder.

"It's been 35 years and my family still lives here," he said. "We still drive by this pier. I bring my boys to fish on the pier. It's funny. I'm in a restaurant talking to people about back then and I'll look up and see somebody across the restaurant that was there then. I remember a man named Gerald and his son was named Bryan who would come out on the pier. I kind of took Bryan under my wing and taught him how to flounder fish. Now this kid has a real estate empire and fishing guide service in Costa Rica. It's neat to see how lives intersect and how we touch each other. And everything really started right here on and under this pier." ■

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