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THE NEEDIEST CASES

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After Opening a Door, Watching Anxiety Fade

By Mathew R. Warren



James Estrin/The New York Times

Atom Thomas, 25, who dropped out of high school because of paralyzing social anxiety, intends to get his G.E.D. and enter college to become an art teacher.

Atom Thomas leafed through his little black sketchpad filled with intricate pencil and ink drawings of landscapes, street scenes and portraits of family members and celebrities like Jay-Z and Michael Jackson. He stopped on one drawing of an angel, wings spread, standing atop a cloud.

“This one makes me think of someone watching over me,” Mr. Thomas said, pointing to the page as he sat in the offices of the New Settlement Apartments, a nonprofit organization that provides affordable housing and community services in the Bronx.

The first time Mr. Thomas went to New Settlement, in May 2010, he was there to attend a job-readiness program. He said his legs were shaking as he approached the brick building. The old fear of being surrounded by new people he did not trust was rushing in, and he stopped in front of the entrance.

“I don’t know what it was, but something just told me to go inside,” said Mr. Thomas, a soft-spoken, baby-faced 25-year-old with a thin mustache. “This was my last chance.”

That day, he pushed aside his fears and entered the building. It was the turning point of his life, he said.

“I didn’t have any training or experience,” Mr. Thomas said. “I didn’t know how to communicate in a professional way. I didn’t have the skills to look for work.” He added: “I started going every day. I was never late. I was on time for the first time ever.”

He had dropped out of high school two months into ninth grade, after developing paralyzing social anxiety that made it very hard to be in a new school with more than 1,000 strange faces.

“It was like a brick wall that I couldn’t get over,” Mr. Thomas said, remembering his paranoia. “I was afraid of new people, of how I was going to get treated.” He said he was never treated for social anxiety or given a diagnosis.

Mr. Thomas spent most of his time at home, sketching and caring for his younger nieces and nephews in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. To no avail, his father, a security guard, and his mother, a nurse assistant, tried to persuade him to go back to school.

“I feel guilty for not succeeding and doing what I was supposed to,” Mr. Thomas said of his teenage years. “I was in a stage where I didn’t want to do anything for myself. I was a big disappointment to my mother and father.”

In 2008, his father lost his job and Mr. Thomas was evicted from his apartment along with his parents, a younger sister and an older sister with two children. Mr. Thomas moved in with another sister, but his lack of employment became a constant strain on their relationship. He felt helpless until a friend showed him a flier for the job-readiness program.

Mr. Thomas successfully completed the program in two months, learning how to prepare a résumé, search for employment and interview for a job. With his newfound skills, his social anxieties began to fade, and he was ready to start looking for work. But he needed clothing appropriate for interviews.

He was referred to the Workforce Advocacy and Support Initiative, which teams up with New Settlement on some programs and is run by the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. He received four grants from the fund totaling \$344.46 to buy clothes, including slacks, button-down shirts, ties and dress shoes. (He also got \$6.74 for lunch on a shopping trip.)

“When you dress up and look professional and you see yourself in the mirror, you ask, ‘Is that you?’ It felt good,” Mr. Thomas said, recalling the first time he tried on one of his new outfits, tying his own tie using a technique he learned at New Settlement.

Craving independence, Mr. Thomas left his sister’s home in summer 2010. He received \$37.53 from the [Neediest Cases](#) Fund to buy personal hygiene products and entered the city’s shelter system. Today, he lives at Create, a shelter for young men in Harlem. He recently received his license to work as a security guard, paying for the classes and fees with the help of \$331 from the fund. The fund also helped him open a bank account with a \$25 grant to make his first deposit last year. Since then, he has begun working as a sales associate at Duane Reade, earning \$7.25 an hour.

Mr. Thomas’s father eventually found a new job as a security guard, he said, and last year his parents got a new place. He hopes to move into an apartment of his own, get his G.E.D. and enter college to become an art teacher.

“I’ve come a long way,” Mr. Thomas said. “I feel confident now. My dreams are going to become a reality.”