



Couleecap

your local community *action* program

Real stories.

Gus Quertermous spent the past many years roaming, working when and where he could find work, and sleeping wherever he could find a place to lay his head.

So, while some people walking into his tiny apartment in Tomah may find it a humble and sparse abode, Gus is so grateful

that he knows where every single item in the place came from.

"That chair and table was here when I got here, this chair a woman I work with gave me. Someone gave me the blow-up mattress. Someone else gave me a microwave. Someone gave me a mop, but I bought the broom and dustpan."

The careful inventory comes after years of having no real home to furnish. Now, for the first time in years, Gus has a place to keep such things as a reading lamp.

Gus moved to Tomah in May 2011, for a job in the grocery store on the base at Fort McCoy. It's a 24-hours-a-week job and **Gus usually bikes the nine or so miles from his apartment in Tomah to the base. He hasn't been late or missed a day once.**

That's saying a lot, considering that for the first two months that he was on the job, Gus lived out of a dumpster. Now, with the help of the Couleecap Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program, he's settled in his studio apartment, and he's hopeful that those days are over.

Gus was born in Indiana, where he lived until he finished high school 30 years ago. After high school, he left for Kentucky, where his dad's side of the family lives. Two months after high school, Gus's father died. A year later, his mother died as well.

For several of the past 10 years, Gus worked at Yellowstone National Park. He loved the work and he carries with him the one thing that remains from that time: a beautifully carved wooden walking stick with a whistle at the top.

Working at the national parks was a pretty good gig. He stayed in dorms with other workers and he got to feel like a part of something good. When the park season ended, it was time to look for another job.

He received an email from a government worker responding to his inquiries about an opening in Tomah. He began the elaborate process of applying for a job on a U.S. military base: fingerprinting, background checks, testing. He managed all of these pieces online and got a bus to Tomah, where he arrived on May 10. He had no place to stay, but he would figure that out when he arrived.

"When I had a chance to get this job, I jumped at the chance," he says. **"What was I going to do, turn down a job? I don't think so.** I had to do something to make things better. Granted, it's a part time job, but I could be in worse shape. I am very thankful."

"I was staying in a metal container."

He looked for someplace to stay, but the two shelters in the area are for veterans, and Gus is not a vet. He asked a few churches if there was someplace he could stay until he got on his feet, and they referred him to the sheriff's office. The only public shelter is in La Crosse, but that is too far away from his job, his entire reason for coming to the area. It was cold, and he needed to sleep. So he did what he had to do.

"I was staying in a metal container," he says. "It's where they put cardboard recycling at. I stayed in there, I didn't bother anybody. I didn't have the funds to do things at that time."

Living on the street is stressful, and it can get dangerous. Gus says that he lives a life that avoids trouble, including staying away from things the sometimes lead to conflict.

"I've seen, from a very early age, that drugs and alcohol aren't the way to go. I try to stay away from all of it. I've seen alcohol destroy individual's lives," Gus says.

A church in Sparta lent him the bicycle that he uses, most days, to get to work. One day, Gus saw an ad for Couleecap. After he started his job, he put in an application looking for help with housing. Gus started searching for a place to live. He found a studio for rent on Craig's List. Couleecap came and inspected the place, and then provided rent and a down payment for Gus's first three months.

"I'm grateful that there's somewhere there for people to get help," he says. "Once, when I was at the Couleecap office, the receptionist said, 'Thank you for persevering in this.' That meant a lot. I've had to work to get what I've had to get."

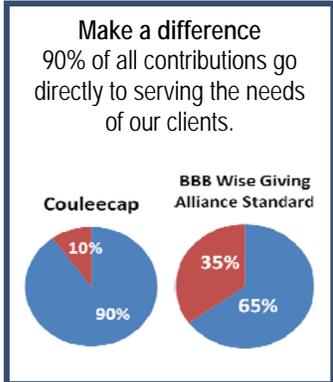
In his little studio, library books are stacked under the one lamp in the place, the air mattress he uses as a bed is propped against the wall in daytime mode, so he can walk through the room. Gus continues his explanation of each item, he shows the dish set he bought: metal plates, cups, and bowls. There is no china. Everything he's purchased could be made immediately road-ready, if it comes to that.

"You know what they say, 'You hope for the best, but you prepare for the worst.' Just in case, you have to be ready," Gus says. "I liked traveling for a while. I want to settle down now."

He says that the help from Couleecap will allow him to do just that, to catch his breath, and to establish his life.

It's been a long way home.

"I liked traveling for a while. I want to settle down now."



Questions?
Contact Kadie Brueggen
Marketing Coordinator
201 Melby Street, Westby WI 54667
Phone: 608-634-7363
Kadie.Brueggen@couleecap.org
www.couleecap.org

Couleecap is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Auxiliary aids and services available upon request.

Grace Jones, Executive Director

Thank you for your support!

Our work is possible because of you and your belief that change is possible. We see **real** people, with **real** stories, and with your help we achieve **real** results.

In 2011, 37154 people benefitted from the valuable services of Couleecap, Gus was one of these people.

Your contributions helped him when he needed it most...