

Daniel Boothe

Thomas Hardy, also known as Cowboy, was homeless his entire life until he was 54 years old. Cowboy was a drifter from birth, his father moving the family of five children around the United States to find work or escape the law. The family would occasionally come back to Muskegon County, where Cowboys, maternal and paternal grandmothers lived to visit. As Cowboy came of age, he continued to live the life he was brought up in, working odd jobs, collecting scrap metal, and sleeping in the woods until his health finally gave in and he had to seek stable housing. Today, Cowboy puts his life experience and his passion for the homeless and vulnerably housed to use within the community here in Muskegon County. Cowboy's on call around the clock working to connect homeless and vulnerably housed individuals to community and much needed resources. Cowboy first came back to Muskegon to be close to his family in 2013. He began volunteering at Secret Suds and soon after found permanent housing in the city. Cowboy has lived in Muskegon since 2013, the longest he has ever lived in any one place. And he said this quote to another reporter, I will continue working what I do to help someone out that is in the same position that I grew up in, homelessness. It is our distinct pleasure to welcome MCC student, Cowboy, to JTALG. Cowboy, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you. Cowboy, first question out of the gates. Your life has been so extraordinary that it took an entire book to tell your story. We will include a link to buy that said book on our website, as I just said. But there's no way we can fully capture it all on a podcast in the amount of time that we have here with you. But we will do our best to give our listeners.

Samantha Korecki

A brief little overview going here.

Daniel Boothe

There you go. There you go. So we will give our listeners our best to give a glimpse into who you are and what you have accomplished in your life. I just want to thank you for being open and willing to share your journey with us. We know it's we know it's one filled with suffering. And you wouldn't wish that on anyone. But what's so powerful is that on the other end of that pain and suffering, there's a real story of beauty. There's a real story of redemption and a calling on your life to stand in the gap for others who have shared in that suffering. So just truly honored to have you here. Kettleboy, like any good story that started at the beginning, tell us about your family and your parents who raised you and kicked things off. How old were you when you had your first sip of alcohol.

Thomas Hardy

My very first sip of alcohol, drink of alcohol was on my first birthday. My dad's family believed in raising the kids on alcohol, so when they got old enough to go to the bar, they didn't make a complete *** of themselves the first time out. So on your first birthday, you got a bottle of beer, and then after that, a bottle of beer a week. That is why over three-fourths of my family is recovering, practicing, or dead alcoholics.

Daniel Boothe

Wow. How long did your alcoholism consume you?

Thomas Hardy

I was 20 years old when I got off alcohol. I am, this April 29th, it will be 45 years that I've been clean.

Daniel Boothe

Wow. Well, tell us a little bit about your childhood, Cowboy, the best you can, and what do you remember? the most when you look back at your adolescence.

Thomas Hardy

Now, what I remember most is giving up, making friends because I knew I was going to be moving soon. My second grade was split between three different schools in two different states. Whitehall Elementary in Whitehall, Michigan, Adams Elementary in Enid, Oklahoma, and Carr Elementary in Wolf Lake.

Samantha Korecki

Wow, big moves.

Thomas Hardy

Yes. I also remember living in a Volkswagen van that was a 1967 Volkswagen van that was painted leopard skin. And then the vehicle after that was a Volkswagen Beetle, where five kids, two adults lived in a Beetle.

Daniel Boothe

There's not a whole lot of room in those cars.

Thomas Hardy

No, that little back pocket behind the seat, back seat, was where my baby sister had her bedroom. Then when we were driving down the road, it was me, my sister Carrie, my

brother Frank, and my sister Colleen side by side on the seat. When we slept, it was me and my brother Frank on the seat, my sisters on the floorboard just below us.

Daniel Boothe

Tell me a little bit about schooling. Was there an education? Did you receive an education? Were you in school? How did you, had you learned to read and write?

Thomas Hardy

Yes, I did go to school. When we were in a town, we made, my dad made sure that we went to school so that we would know a little bit more about life as book work goes, not just life on the road.

Daniel Boothe

So, you're living in a car. What was your father doing at the time? What was the family doing for income? And where were you living when the Beetlebug was parked?

Thomas Hardy

What we did was every Sunday, us kids would be on a church stage singing hymns and country gospel for what is called love offerings back in the day, so we can continue on down the road. We also collected scrap metal and stuff like that. At one point when Beetle was parked, we were up in Winnipeg, Canada, and those kids slept underneath of a picnic table. If anybody's ever heard of a Canadian black fly, that's where I found out what they were like. I don't like them.

Samantha Korecki

I know that your relationship with your father has been beyond complicated. At that time, what was he doing to financially support you guys? And then tell me about your relationship with your father a little bit.

Thomas Hardy

My father, he did carpentry work. He also did, drove trucks out in California. We all, my whole family did migrant work also. We picked cotton, we picked blueberries, we picked apples, we picked whatever we could get doing to have a bit of an income. My relationship with my father, my father was a very abusive man. He was also a genius, and they say there's a fine line between genius and insanity. He crossed that line so many times. There was no line anymore. My dad truly believed to his dying day that God came to him in a vision and told him he was to beat us kids, teach us kids we were garbage and have sex with us kids. I remember when I was 11 years old, I was jumping out some bed springs in

our garage. My foot got caught, and I hit a Boy Scout camp kitchen across my nose, and it shattered my nose all the way down into my sinuses. And back in 1970, in White Hall, they did not believe in anesthetic that close to the brain. So they sat and stitched my nose with no anesthetic. I got home and I was crying because I was in severe pain. My dad took me out to the garage, picked up a 2x4 and said, this is for crying, men don't cry, and put me in the hospital using that 2x4.

Samantha Korecki

That's horrific.

Thomas Hardy

So that's the kind of man I grew up under.

Daniel Boothe

The best he can, you tell us a little bit about what kind of trauma does that do to someone who, to experience that level of abuse? How long did it take you to get over it?

Thomas Hardy

That can be summed up fairly easily. My dad was an ordained minister, and when I turned 18, I could not understand that if there was a God, how could he allow a man like my dad to minister his word?

Daniel Boothe

Sure.

Thomas Hardy

And if there was a God, how could he allow bad things to happen to innocent people, especially children?

Samantha Korecki

Right.

Thomas Hardy

It took me 15, 20 years of studying many different religions to finally be able to answer those two questions. Number one, God did not ordain my dad, man did. Number 2, God allows bad things to happen because he gave each and every one of us the right to choose between right and wrong. And if he takes that choice away from one person, he's got to take it away from everybody. Having been able to answer those two questions, I was able

to come back to Christianity and ultimately be able to forgive my dad. Because Jesus says, forgive. He doesn't say forget, but he says forgive. Sure. Because it's God's place to do the judging, not mine.

Samantha Korecki

Let's fast forward to your adult years. Where were you by the time you were 21 or so?

Thomas Hardy

Yeah, I was married to my second wife at 21. And I was already a recovering alcoholic. And at that time, I was down in southwestern Missouri.

Samantha Korecki

Okay.

Thomas Hardy

I was trying to go to a community college, but I ended up having to drop out because of finances. I'm going to be telling on myself. At 18, I was a stripper. here in Muskegon County.

Samantha Korecki

Look at that.

Thomas Hardy

At 19, I was a ***** on Broadway in the Heights. 20 Avenue went into the hospital to get off alcohol, had seven grand mal seizures in a nine-hour period from withdrawal. Doctor gave me 3 choices. He said, go back to drinking, don't quit, die an alcoholic's death. Don't go back to drinking, quit, die of massive seizures, don't go back to drinking, possibly live to a ripe old age.

Daniel Boothe

I think I'll take option C.

Thomas Hardy

That's what I've taken so far. Were you going to say something?

Daniel Boothe

No, I just wanted to clarify for our listeners who are listeners, just so we can follow along, 17 years old, you're married to a woman. Is she aware of your stripping and your prostitution activities?

Thomas Hardy

Oh, we were separated by that time.

Daniel Boothe

Oh, okay, gotcha, gotcha.

Thomas Hardy

In fact, we were separated just right about my 18th birthday. Gotcha. So.

Samantha Korecki

And then the second wife, you said you were married when you were 21, when did you get married?

Thomas Hardy

I got married on November 7th, 1980, yeah, 1980, right soon after my 21st birthday.

Samantha Korecki

Okay.

Daniel Boothe

So if you're listening to this podcast, obviously this is an audio medium and you cannot see the cowboy. But let me describe the cowboy and what he looks like. He looks like a cowboy. He's got a long silver hair. He's got a really, really full silver beard and a cowboy hat that looks like it's got to be at least 40 years old. Tell us about how you became, no longer were you Mr. Hardy, you are now Cowboy. And tell us about that transformation and how did this person emerge?

Thomas Hardy

I was down in Nawlins, New Orleans. Nawlins, I love it, I love it. I was down in, oh, they pronounce it Nawlins down there. But I was down there and I was sleeping in one of the train stations for the tourist trains going around the quarter. And I was working in a Cajun restaurant. The owner of the Cajun restaurant is the one that actually gave me the nickname cowboy, because the true definition of a cowboy is a drifter. And because of my drifting across the country, Before I was old enough and since I was old enough to be on my own, he decided to start calling me cowboy and it stuck.

Daniel Boothe

And you've been cowboy ever since. Yep. Tell us a little bit about the hat that you're wearing.

Thomas Hardy

This hat, okay. The hat I'm wearing, my first wife got, she lives out in Wisconsin. She got it and sent it to our daughter. to give to me for my birthday about four years ago. But the hat I had before that was my son-in-law 's hat when him and my daughter got married. I've had a lot of hats and they've gone through the weather, they've gone through snow, they've gone through rain, they've been driven over, they've been sat on.

Samantha Korecki

Sturdy hats.

Daniel Boothe

So you were homeless for 54 years. So trying to keep this story, keep a through line through this story. You were homeless for 54 years. What was the aha moment when you said that you needed to have a place to live, a roof over your head? Can you take us to that moment?

Thomas Hardy

I was down alongside the South Branch of the Muskegon River at the end of Sheridan. And It got to the point where I was having a hard time breathing. I couldn't hardly walk because my arthritis in my knees, my body was just giving out. And I knew that if I was to continue going back down that road, somebody would find me alongside the highway dead. That's when I realized it's, I gotta stop. I miss it. I miss the broach. I miss being my own boss.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah.

Thomas Hardy

I miss the freedom, but I don't miss the pain.

Daniel Boothe

Right.

Samantha Korecki

Now, I know that there are a lot of misconceptions about the unhoused in Muskegon County. Can you tell us what a common misconception that you often come across is?

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, when people think homeless, they think they're this, or that, and there's obviously folks are wrong about it. So yeah.

Thomas Hardy

A lot of people, and I've heard this over and over again, all homeless people are drug addicts or alcoholics, and they choose to be that. So that's why they're homeless. That is a very small number compared to the homeless situation. When I was still homeless in 2013, there was the count that was done for Muskegon County, there was 2,000 homeless. Of that, there was 500, one-quarter of them that was veterans. And the honest thing about it is most that are homeless got sick, lost their job, lost their home. We just had a new count and the homeless family rate jumped 55% between 2023 and 2024.

Samantha Korecki

Wow.

Thomas Hardy

That's a family is considered one parent and one child or more. At least one adult and one child. That jumped 55% in one year.

Samantha Korecki

That's crazy.

Thomas Hardy

But the biggest misconception that I hear is they choose to be alcoholics. They choose to be drug addicts. That's why they're homeless.

Daniel Boothe

Your quote, I will continue working what I do to help someone out that is in the same position that I grew up in, homelessness. Tell us a little bit about the work that you're doing here in Muskegon County. What drives you about it? What fulfillment do you get out of it?

Thomas Hardy

First of all, I work with the Muskegon County Continuum of Care for Homelessness.

Daniel Boothe

Awesome.

Thomas Hardy

I'm on their committee and I make my meetings when I can. But right now, because my classes are during their meetings, so I haven't been able this semester. I also work at my church. The first Saturday of every month we have A mobile food pantry.

Daniel Boothe

What church is that?

Thomas Hardy

First Congregational Church on Jefferson.

Daniel Boothe

Okay.

Thomas Hardy

And on the last Saturday of every month, we have what is called the Saturday morning breakfast, where we make a buffet-style breakfast for the neighborhood, for the homeless, for anybody that needs or wants a meal. And it's free of charge. And there's no limit to eating either. I've had, I've seen people go up for thirds. Right.

Samantha Korecki

Did you ever utilize something like that while you were homeless?

Thomas Hardy

Oh yeah. In fact, I am the security there and I eat right with them, right with the people. Most of them know who Cowboy is there.

Samantha Korecki

That's great. And most of the people at MCC know who Cowboy is too. Now we've got to come to that \$1,000,000 question. How did you come to MCC? What are you studying and what's your goal here?

Thomas Hardy

I am on the board of directors at HealthWest, but I also want to become what is called a peer support specialist for the homeless, substance use disorder, mental health issues. And in order, I've got the experience, lived experience, but I need at least a bachelor's degree in social worker to be able to continue in Healthwest as doing that.

Daniel Boothe

Sure. And doing that important work. not to get too philosophical here about religion, but it seems to me that you as a Christian man feeding the poor and housing the unhoused is about as Christian as it comes. It's truly doing the work of the gospel of Christ. Would you agree with that?

Thomas Hardy

Yes, I would. Yes, I would. But I also have seen churches The congregation may want to help, but I had a pastor down in Orleans come walk up to me and look me in the eye and say, you're going to hell. I said, what do you mean? He said, well, if you knew God, you wouldn't be homeless. Since you're homeless, that means you don't know God, so you're going to hell.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, show me where, show me in the Bible where that's stated.

Samantha Korecki

Like another crazy misconception.

Thomas Hardy

I said, then you're saying our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ went and stayed in hell. He said, what do you mean? I said, well, he was born homeless. By the time he was two, he was a refugee in a foreign country, and he spent the last 3 1/2 years wandering the roads. saying in Matthew 8, 20, foxes have dens, birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head.

Daniel Boothe

That's right.

Thomas Hardy

He was homeless.

Samantha Korecki

Certainly A nomadic lifestyle.

Daniel Boothe

That's so amazing that you're on this journey. We just wish you the best of luck in your studies and we know that you're going to get there. You know the book, which I'll plug again, go on to muskegoncc.edu and we'll have a link where you can purchase this book. I

highly recommend it. I saw the pictures of you. You've dropped some weight, haven't you? Yes, I am. Good for you. What was the secret?

Thomas Hardy

Being able to get my knees replaced and being able to get around better.

Daniel Boothe

Maybe I need to get my knees replaced, Samantha, so I can get on that one. So this, the book, the first part of the book is kind of the road to redemption, the road of 54 years of homeless. But let me ask you what the second book will be for the rest of your days here on earth. Is it a happy ending?

Thomas Hardy

I'm hoping so. I'm hoping so. I can tell you this, even though I would love to have homelessness end, it's not going to end in my lifetime. So homelessness is going to be with us. The poor is going to be with us. I'm one of the poor myself. I'll be honest, I live off from, I live off from Social Security retirement, which is a very small amount. And what I get is a board of director at HealthWest. I live way below poverty. My only saving grace is I own the trailer that I live in.

Daniel Boothe

Sure. Well, you know, you say that homelessness is not going to end in your lifetime and nor is poverty going to end in your lifetime. But I think that is what a true servant's heart has is you know that you're not going to cross the finish line, but all you can do in your time here is move the needle and move the flag, take the flag up and say, and carry it as long as you can until you can't carry it anymore and you hope that somebody comes up behind you and carries the flag more, right?

Thomas Hardy

That is the truth. That is my goal. Work. Try to help bring the homeless rate down. and have somebody be able to take over for me?

Samantha Korecki

Absolutely. And in your time at HealthWest and at MCC, I'm sure you'll find a great group of people to pass that baton to.

Daniel Boothe

Hey, last question before we go, Cowboy. If people see you in the hallway and they want to come up and shake your hand, what do you think about that?

Thomas Hardy

Handshakes and hugs are welcome.

Samantha Korecki

There's one word that you don't want them to call you, right?

Thomas Hardy

Do not call me sir.

Daniel Boothe

Tell us about that real quick.

Thomas Hardy

You know, there's three reasons. Number one, I've worked for a living all my life. Number 2, when I was in the Marine Corps, I was never an officer. And #3, I spent enough time in the deep south to know that sir is a derogative, is a forced statement from people of color.

Samantha Korecki

So when you see Cowboy on campus in the hallways, go up, shake his hand, give him a hug. Do not call him sir. Call him Cowboy.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, or brother or man or friend.

Samantha Korecki

Thank you so much for talking with us today, Cowboy. Your story is an inspiration. We love to have you on JTalk.

Thomas Hardy

Thank you for having me.