

Conner Prairie

Tom Miller, director of programs at Indy Reads, interviews his friend, Randy French, about his first memories of Conner Prairie why he decided to join Indy Reads, an adult literacy program.

Tom: OK, Randy, we're obviously at Conner Prairie. When you think of Conner Prairie, what do you think of?

Randy: I think of a museum of history, back in the 1800's. How people lived and survived and worked, how they worshipped God, and everyday life.

Tom: Do you remember when the first time you came here was?

Randy: I remember getting off the bus and walking down the street the first time. I think it was like back in 1836, and I was really impressed by how things were back then, how people stayed in costume, how people stayed in character. And we had dinner at the Carter House.

Tom: The Hearthside Supper.

Randy: The Hearthside Supper. That was an incredible spirit. We helped fix dinner. I remember peeling potatoes, that's what I did. That was a lot of fun.

Tom: We came here hoping to improve our students' cultural literacy, but you know what, we don't ask them. You're a student, you've been through it – do you think it's important that we continue to come to places like this? And if so, why?

Randy: I think it's very important because it brings American history in living color. It does. It's like going to Gettysburg – you cannot understand the Civil War until you get to Gettysburg. You really can't understand American history, back in the 1800's, Indiana history, without coming to Conner Prairie. When you walk up and down the mud streets, and walk into the homes with the fireplaces burning, feel the culture and how the city was run, how the town was run, the drug store – it just gives you a concept. It's not just reading a book, it's like you're walking through time.

Life was simple then, and I'm not sure that was a bad thing. To just live a simple life, love your family, love your neighbors, treat people kindly – I'm not sure that was a bad thing. I think it was a good thing, and I think we've lost some of that in the last 100 years, I really do. People don't know their neighbors, and back then, they had to know their neighbors. They depended on each other, to survive. I think that was a good thing. I really do.

Tom: Obviously, we came here with *IndyReads*, which is a not-for-profit adult literacy program. We're helping adults learn how to read and write. You came to us in 1999, 2000, sometime in there. Can you tell us about why you'd struggled with reading or why you never learn how to read?

Randy: I never learned how to read because I never went to school. I had physical disabilities when I was a child and they would not allow me go to school, so I never went to school at all. So in that process, I never learned how to read and write. I learned how to read a little bit when I was 18 years old, and from 18 to about age 56, I didn't do anything with my education; I just worked. So when I found out about *IndyReads*, and I started going there, I proceeded from there to learn how to read and write.

Tom: Was there a turning point, was there one thing that finally made you decide to get help? I know you had learned a little bit on your own and practiced that, but was there, like, a turning point?

Randy: The turning point was that one day my wife asked me if I'd like to learn how to read and write. And it kinda freaked me out in a way, because I thought, I'm in my 40's and I've never learned how to read and write. I'd never even gone to school. And to go to a classroom setting or a one-on-one setting really made me nervous. But I thought, what do I have to lose by going? It was free, and I had an opportunity to do something. So I just dived into it. I had nothing to lose, and to just keep going. I knew if I quit, I'd probably never go back. I'd probably never succeed in life. I believe that if you get discouraged, you just get up and try the next day.

Tom: So do you think things like this help? The trips to Conner Prairie, the trips to wherever. Do you think that will help or these types of things will help people keep motivated or help them improve their literacy or things like that?

Randy: I think it does because you get to spend time with other people who have problems and other people who've had success. When you go on these trips, you're surrounded by people who are in the program, and people who've been successful in the program. And you're doing something about history with those people plus you're spending time with people who are doing well in the program. It gives you more confidence knowing other people have done it also.