

TIM O'NEILL

Central Nine Adult Education Success Story



This is Tim's story, his words are honest, inspiring, and unforgettable. He shared his journey as one of our graduation speakers. With his permission, we are honored to share his story in his own words.

Meet Tim—

Growing Up Without an Education

My story is an interesting one, to say the least. I grew up in Virginia. My family homeschooled me under what Virginia calls a religious exemption. Unfortunately, that meant I grew up without a real education. I'm not joking when I tell people that I taught myself to read when I was 17 years old. I started as simply as you can imagine—learning the ABCs, matching letters to sounds, and reading the easiest children's books I could find. I went from books that said things like, "Daddy is cool, but Mom is better," to reading *The Boxcar Children*. Eventually, I was reading novels like *Game of Thrones*. I went from solving children's mysteries to wondering why Eddard Stark had to lose his head! Learning to read was one of the biggest accomplishments of my life, but it didn't magically solve everything. For years, I thought I was going to make a living online. After trying and failing, I finally realized I needed to get a job. The problem was that I was 22 years old, had no work experience, and didn't have a high school diploma. I couldn't even get an interview. Eventually, I applied where my sister worked—Chick-fil-A. Looking back, that decision changed my life.



"Don't define your life by what you've already done. Define it by what you could do."

The Job That Changed Everything

Before I started working at Chick-fil-A, I spent most of my days sitting in my room watching movies, scrolling YouTube, and playing video games. I had very little confidence, very few friends, and no direction. Chick-fil-A taught me so much more than how to work in a restaurant. It taught me that I genuinely love working with people. I discovered that I thrive when things get busy and challenging. There's something incredibly exciting about working through a rush with your team and realizing you're absolutely crushing it together. More importantly, it changed me as a person. The version of me from three years ago wouldn't recognize the person I am today. I used to struggle to keep a conversation going for more than a minute. Today, I can walk up to someone I've never met and have a real conversation without thinking twice. I honestly believe my life didn't truly begin until I started working there. I went from being a depressed loner who never left the house to someone surrounded by friends. I went from someone who couldn't finish anything he started to becoming a dependable employee, a leader, and someone who could make a positive impact on others. Chick-fil-A will always be one of the biggest turning points in my life. About a year ago, my sister—who had graduated from Central Nine Adult Education the year before—encouraged me to move to Indianapolis and earn my High School Equivalency. I decided to take the chance. Coming to Indianapolis was one of the best decisions I've ever made. Through my time at Central Nine Adult Education and working at my new Chick-fil-A here, I finally figured out what I want to do with my life. I want to go into public service. I want to serve others and make a positive difference in my community. I've since moved back to Virginia, where I plan to attend college and continue working toward that goal. Even though I had already moved home, I drove all the way back to Indianapolis just so I could celebrate graduation with everyone who had been part of this journey.

My Message to Others

If there's one thing I hope people remember from my story, it's this: The hardest battle you'll ever fight is the one inside your own mind. Don't define your life by what you've already done. Define it by what you could do. For a long time, I believed I wasn't capable of much. It wasn't until I stepped outside my comfort zone, got a job, earned my education, and started living my life that I discovered what I was actually capable of becoming. Learning to read. Getting my first job. Earning my High School Equivalency. Each one was a challenge I knew I had to face. Now it's time for the next one. To everyone earning their High School Equivalency, congratulations. We made it. This milestone isn't the end of our story—it's just the beginning of the next chapter. Thank you for taking the time to read my story.