

## **Taylor Nawrocki: Writing Samples**

### **Coffee with A Shot of Financial Independence: An Ode to CEF**

It is a Friday, ten minutes after the doors are unlocked, and the Community Empowerment Fund (CEF) office is unusually relaxed. Walking in, I pass the main desk, littered with office supplies, where Maggie, the woman in her mid-twenties who founded the nonprofit five years ago, does the daily office chores of sorting through emails and file cabinets in a casual green pullover and brown cords. The office is cluttered with mismatched chairs, a desk pushed against every wall, and a circular table in the center of the small room. The walls house a collage of comforting décor: photographs, wooden letters spelling CEF, a Declaration of Financial Independence, a construction paper “Savings Tree”, with a savings goal written on each leaf: a car, a down payment on a house, graduate school. A man pops food in the microwave in the back, and the smell of tomato sauce spreads through the office.

“Darryl!” Maggie says to a man walking into the office. They small talk good-naturedly before Maggie abruptly asks, “Are you any good at making coffee?” Darryl laughs. He doesn’t.

They continue chatting when another man walks in. “Hey Tommy! How are you? You’re good at making coffee right?”

Along the edges of the room, clusters of people are at work. CEF takes a unique approach to the obstacle of financial insecurity. Advocates, mostly college kids, and members, adults experiencing poverty or homelessness, pair up in an effort to support members to financial independence. The idea is to create an atmosphere where relationships thrive where, instead of keeping a professional distance, advocates and members build friendships and take on issues together.

Colloquially called simply “the office”, the space is a big part of what made the CEF community grow. From nomadic meetings at coffee shops to an established space, the CEF village, as some call it, has taken on new life in the past couple of years.

Between appointments, some of the regular members hang out in the office. Paul, a vibrant, middle-aged man who has a tendency to talk a little too close to people’s faces, launches into colorful conversation, talking too fast for breaths. He talks about his love for impressionist painting—Mozart, Van Gogh—his favorite is Starry Night, and the conversation swerves to the school he taught at and attended in New York, his time at UNC’s graduate school, his relationship with his daughter who is moving to Australia soon, and about how he used to teach computer science but can’t figure out how to get an internet block off of his new laptop. Jon, a staff member, walks into the room and Paul prepares to hound him down. Jon tries to avoid the inevitable. “You’re probably going to pump me full of chocolate cake or something!” Jon says.

“This is substantial! It’s a waffle! Look at it Jon, it has your name on it!”

People spill from the cramped office to the hallway, where I sit and watch them fill out paperwork. A man sits down in the chair next to me. He is new to CEF, has been coming in for about two weeks now. His name is Robert, came from Tennessee. He once caught an

eel, you can catch them on the Potomac and send them to France where they are a delicacy, he says. Miles, a member in his early twenties, walks out of the office holding an empty coffee pot. Robert is delighted to hear that it is free-coffee Friday.

## **An interview with Richard McKinley Watts, owner of Oddities and Such**

*Richard McKinley Watts is the owner of Oddities and Such, an antique furniture, and more store in the small town of Carrboro, North Carolina. The store takes up half of a cement block of a building and is easy to miss. A strip mall lies behind it.*

*Richard is 6'7 and has a short white beard and a nasally voice. He has never married. He talks with his hands, drawing attention to the dark furniture stain around his fingernails. Sometimes he stutters a little or, when he's thinking, squints his eyes and looks into the distance. He used to be nearly addicted to Mountain Dew, but has quit the habit and taken up drinking Pepsi instead—taking sips from a two-liter bottle in between sentences. He has begun an attempt to look more professional at work, switching out his shorts and Hawaiian shirts for pants and a blazer. Surrounding him are pieces of wooden furniture, Mardi Gras masks, troll-like dolls, Nascar signs, curtains made from old CDs...*

I had gone to school to go into law enforcement. I was almost a straight-A student just up until the very end. There was a course about stress and I had three instructors come up to me and tell me not to go into law enforcement. Because I take things personal and I would go and do things and they said I would probably be in jail in about a year or two. They said 'you're perfect, your size, your attitude, everything is great but you've got this thing about you...If you know something is wrong, you correct it one way or another.' And that's how I got into this.

My father had a used furniture store here in the '70s, in the whole building. He built this place back in '48. He did it up until about 1986, '87, until the roof caved in—we knew it

would. He closed for about three years and over here across at the gym, that's ours also, that's where my house used to be as a kid. He decided to build an A & P store back in '68-'69. Moved our house and built that. *[Later]* the A&P building was empty and we decided to put a flea market in there. Back in late '95, Halloween, 'cause I missed going downtown, in '95 that's when I got over here *[in this building]*. The first name was Rich's Treasures. I changed it within the first month. I changed it to Oddities and Such. It's odd. I had to look in the book to make sure I spelled it right.

My brother's in the back room, well he's here one day a week. I try to be here, five, six, seven, but officially I'm here five days a week. We've talked about selling the place...just brought it up and stuff. It wouldn't be worth it. The tax you'd have to pay—just keep the property, use it, get a little profit for it. I enjoy it. I'm not getting rich. I try to be fair, that's the thing. I have different people from outside the area that come in and say 'your prices are so good' then local 'you're so high! You're so high!' I think I try to price everything fair. I have to make a little profit, unless it's something I just want to say I've had. I don't charge the full value of something. Unless it's totally, like, that chest of drawers over there. One of a kind. That's handmade. It's a two-piece, walnut, thick, not your thin piece, it's thick wood, heavy. It comes a part in two pieces. I got it from a seller, but he got it from the mountains of North Carolina. The guy had made it for his sister. She passed before he could give it to her. The right person will come in and know, instead of paying all this big bucks for this fake furniture that will fall apart in four or five years.

I buy for how it *[furniture]* looks and the price I have to pay for it and the work I have to put into it to make it good. I don't know the names. Don't ask me if it's contemporary, I don't know. It's a piece of furniture! I think that's stuck in my brain now, contemporary. That lady came in here and used that word...I don't use that. You know *[articulates words dramatically]* 'I'm looking for some contemporary furniture and you don't look like you might have any.' I just wanted to say something...you don't, you don't say nothing, just 'no, we don't.' I try to, you don't want people to leave, you want them to leave kind of happy, at least a little bit because a happy person driving a car is a lot better than a mad person driving a car and you know, I think about things like that. About what my, about what I would do if I start screaming at you and you leave here so upset and something could happen...

I look at people. I judge. Before, you know, I've gotten by in my life by if you're right you're right if you're not, you're not. There aren't too many nots around here. There aren't too many nots around here, but there are others that I will not let in my store. Because there is no reason for them to come in my store. The only reason they'll come into my store is to steal something. I know it. When I was running my uncle's motel it was the same thing. I could kinda judge certain people right some people no. And one time I was right. Some people come in, wanting to rent a room and they come in at night round 12 o'clock knocking on the back door. I said 'no, you've got to leave right now.' Next day I found out they robbed some motels out in Hillsborough. I've got by good in my life being able to tell when things are right and when things are not right. *[Once or twice throughout our chat, Richard stands up abruptly to look out of the windows at passerby].*

Things have changed. Things have gotten so pricey. I remember when things were cheap. The formica top tables...stuff like that. There's a lot more people in the business. I was in business before the computer thing. I used to go out traveling around. I don't waste my time doing that because there are so many people going around...especially on the list. I hate saying that name. Craigslist. Craig is the one who, I had a little problem with a guy named Craig *[in school]*, he was a big guy. Craig is the one who shot me. Craig is the one who almost cut me in the guts. Craig is the one who caused a problem between me and the girlfriend that I had. And Craig is the one that supposedly... well the sheriff came knocking on the door looking for Craig. Craig has always messed up. Then they came up with Craigslist. Then I was like alright, if a person, guy's name is Craig, then just don't come around *[laughs]*. But Craig has messed up my life a lot.

Everything's changed. Especially when they *[customers]* bring the friends of people who have worked in this building since I was ten. We sold gas, candy, stuff like that. The ones that come in from Carrboro School will bring their grandchildren, their great grand children, in and say 'I bought candy from here when I was going to school!' It's good to be at a place to be known but... There aren't too many of us left, born and raised here, working in town.

## **Down the Aisle of David's Bridal**

When I enter David's Bridal, my eyes are overwhelmed by the madhouse of people and racks on racks of gowns. Colorful dresses for the wedding party hang on my left, the sideshow of the operation. White to off-white gowns for the main attraction hang on my right. The A-lines, mermaids, and traditional gowns are squeezed side-by-side, the lacey, beaded, and ruffled nestle together on the standing racks, blending together in a polyester, taffeta, rayon mass. I feel claustrophobic.

A shabby, green carpeted stage stands a few inches off the ground near the back of the store where brides-to-be stand like Barbie dolls dressed in their pre-tailored gowns. Surrounding them are a host of bottle-sucking toddlers, saleswomen stained with retail smiles, and mothers, sisters, and friends ready to throw in their two-sense. Nearly all of the brides purse their lips, tilt their head, and clutch their gown's fabric while examining their appearance in the mirrors plastering the entirety of the outer fitting room. Upon first glance, every bride and her cluster blend together like the mass-produced wedding dresses they wear.

With a closer look, one of these pursing brides stands out as the only solitary dress hunter. Her eyes don't turn to hoards of companions for advice, only her own in the mirror. She stands half-hidden behind the fitting room door, coming out onto the stage just enough to see the mirror. Her dark hair stands out against the bright white of the dress she wears. She bunches the fabric around her waist and feels the way the dress fits against her, pausing for a few moments at her reflection before going back in the fitting room.

She tries on a few more gowns in this way before stepping down from the stage wearing jeans and a grey Northface jacket, once more part of our everyday world. Her



designated saleswoman checks in, asking about one dress in particular. “That was the most beautiful one,” the bride-to-be says thoughtfully, her words laced with an accent I don’t recognize. She’s coming back Thursday with a friend.