



Photos by Gena Smith
George Thomas shuffles through some textbooks at the RCCC bookstore as the Philip Morris USA cigarette machine operator prepares to go back to school.

Philip Morris workers hit the books, brace for shutdown

By **GENA SMITH**
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MIDLAND - A 23-year-old son sits on a plaid couch looking at a yearbook contemplating his father's future.

"These poor people. They're all going to lose their jobs, every last one of them," said Aaron Thomas. He passed the Philip Morris yearbook off to his older brother. "Here you go, I've had enough depression."

George Thomas was in the first group of production employees hired in 1982 before the 2.4 million square-foot Philip Morris plant opened a year later. The plant, which sits on 2,100 acres in Concord will close, officials say, in 2010.

Thomas, a cigarette machine operator, said he's leaning on his faith to help him cope with losing the job he's had for more than 26 years.

"I got this really cool letter from a friend at church the week it was announced that the plant was closing," Thomas said. "It said that God knew this was going to happen before you were born. And I hadn't thought of it that way. But He did. He knows what I'm going to be doing when it's over. If he's in charge of it, then what am I worried about?"

But the lifetime Midland resident is bracing for reality.

"I don't have a college education," he said. "I'm not an electrician or a mechanic."

Thomas will be about one year shy of pulling his full retirement when the plant closes.

"Dwight Moody said there are three kinds of faith: struggling faith, clinging faith and then there is resting faith - the man in the boat reaching out to help others," he said. "What I want to have is the resting faith. That's what I want, and I can't say I have it yet."

Thomas and his wife, Belinda, help lead the youth group at their church.

"For 15 years, I've been telling (the youth) we have to rely on God for strength and guidance and when things aren't going the way you want them to, you look to Him for your source of guidance," he said. "It's been easy telling that... I didn't need to lean on Him so much then. Now the rug has been yanked out from under me. I can't let the youth see me balled up crying in the corner. I have to practice what I've been preaching. It's one thing that's kept me accountable because I know I've got 50 kids who look at me."

It's really amazing, Thomas said, when the youth tell him they know he loves them because he didn't choose to move to Richmond.

Thomas just signed up to take two classes from Rowan-Cabarrus Community College. Three days a week, he doesn't get home until 10:30 at night.

"But like Belinda said, I'm not in Richmond. I get to come home at night and sleep in my own bed and be near my family," he said.

The R3 program at the college pays for his books while Philip Morris pays for his schooling, which he said he's very grateful for.

The father of three will receive severance pay when the plant closes, which he said "is very, very nice of the company to give it to us."

But he's confused on the company's logic.

"It didn't make sense to us on the one hand because we've always been the most efficient plant they've had," Thomas said. "I can understand them consolidating everything in one place - I just wish it were here."

He also doesn't understand government officials.

"To me, the city and state should have done whatever they had to do to keep Philip Morris here - it pumps a lot of money into the county."

Because Thomas won't be 55 by the time the plant closes, his insurance won't stick with him. If he chooses to retire early, he'd take a 60 percent penalty.

"I've got a lot of good friends it's affecting," he said. "A lot of them are heading to Richmond, they're going to be separated from their families. And the pain in their eyes and the pain in their faces... there was more than one teary eye that I've talked to since all this started."

Thomas worries about putting his daughter through college and paying the bills.

"For me, the most difficult thing is going to be trying to find another job," Thomas said. "I know I've got supposedly a couple of years before I lose my job, but my thing is... I'm going to be 53 years old. That's not exactly the top of the food chain at the job market."

But Thomas sees a higher good.

"You spend a lot of time in prayer," he said. "Since this happened, I've had more spiritual conversations with people, and I've heard many other folks talking about their faith in God. This has made people realize where their help comes from."

He said divine provision has been evident throughout his life.

"There have been so many things so many times in my life where things worked out where I didn't see it coming. ...Bad things happen to people, but there are so many good things that come from that."

He smiled.

"I've got to be patient and wait for God to take care of it. But in the meantime, if there's something I need to do, I would like for God to send me a letter."