

Ann Thomas

It is my great pleasure to present my friend and colleague, Ann Thomas. First let me give you some biographical information about Ann. Born Ann Prince, she attended Lincoln High School, graduated from Wheeling High School, attended and graduated from Ohio Valley General Hospital School of Nursing, and was employed as a nurse at OVGH for approximately 12 years. She became an Ohio County Schools Nurse in 1971 and served in all the schools at one time or another until her retirement in 2001. She also performed duties as a visiting nurse in the valley for many years as an additional job. She continues to work as a substitute nurse for Ohio and Marshall County Schools up to and including this summer.

During her long and distinguished career as a nurse she has also served on the boards of the Wheeling YWCA, Ohio Valley Medical Center, Wheeling Health Right, BB&T Bank, Laughlin Chapel, Housing Connection, the Regional Economic Development Authority, and the West Virginia Regional Health Science and Technology Academy. She

serves on the West Virginia Women's Commission and was recently reappointed by Governor Tomblin to the West Liberty University board for a term until 2015. Ann is the widow of Clyde Thomas, four term city councilman, mother of Shawn and Scott, and the grandmother of 4.

All of us have stories about Ann Thomas and know that she loves to tell stories as well. You will be delighted to know that she recently became the subject of an oral interview performed by a board member of the Friends of Wheeling and so some of her stories are being preserved by the Wheeling National Historical Area Corporation.

Now I'd like to tell some Ann Thomas stories. When I was in the Army I learned that the definition of a hero is not one who does heroic things, but rather, is one who does "ordinary things" in "extraordinary circumstances". As a young girl Ann was a member of a segregated community in which her mother earned income by hosting black rail employees who were passing through Wheeling and needed rooms for overnight accommodations. Ann belonged to the YWCA as a young girl, an ordinary activity, but it was the black YWCA

housed in a separate house from the YWCA we know today.

I mentioned that Ann had attended Lincoln High School. Lincoln High School was the very fine high school that served as the northern panhandle segregated school for Afro-Americans during our community's years as a segregated community. The staff of that school did a marvelous job of preparing the black youngsters for life in our community and for a day when integration would finally occur. As good as education that Lincoln provided, separate was not equal. Ann decided she wanted to be a nurse. To be eligible to be accepted to nursing school you had to have a high school chemistry credit. The separate, but not equal, Lincoln High didn't offer chemistry. Hence there were no black nurses in our community. When school desegregation finally occurred Ann took advantage of the opportunity, entered Wheeling High School, took chemistry and the other prerequisites to be a nurse and earned a diploma, one of the first blacks to do so at Wheeling High School. Earning a diploma at Wheeling High School was an ordinary thing to do. But doing so as one of the first blacks to attend

the school was doing so in extraordinary circumstances fraught with many difficulties.

When she announced she wanted to be a nurse she was told that there were many great opportunities as a nurse's aide. Ann said, "But I want to be a nurse". After some more major difficulties, and interventions from a number of people, Ann was admitted to OVGH nursing school, the first Afro-American to be admitted. Getting admitted to nursing school was an ordinary accomplishment. Getting admitted as the first black trainee was doing so in extraordinary circumstances.

She related to me a story about being a nurse trainee and joining her classmates for an evening on the town culminating with a visit to a well-known restaurant that sat adjacent to the hospital and school. When her friends all wanted to have a seat for a late night bite to eat, she said she would go on to the residence. When they asked why, she said that she was allowed to order take out at the restaurant but wouldn't be allowed to sit down to eat. They said come join us and when the meals arrived, with hers as a to go order, and when the management refused to let her eat in the restaurant, all

the girls got up and left their meals, and their checks, and went back to the residence. When they were called in the next morning to explain their behavior, the school administration, hearing the whole story, declared the restaurant off limits to all the students. Within a day the restaurant changed its policy. So, going to a restaurant to eat was a very ordinary activity, but doing so as a black nursing student was very extraordinary and resulted in the desegregation of a community landmark.

Becoming a nurse in Ohio County Schools is an ordinary achievement. But doing so as the first black nurse in Ohio County Schools is an extraordinary achievement.

When I was Director of Student Services of Ohio County Schools I was in charge of the nurses among other duties. I came to know Ann and her work as a professional and can attest to her work ethic, professionalism, dedication and delightful personality.

When I was invited to join the Wheeling Lions I deferred saying I didn't want to belong to any organization that wasn't open to women or minorities. I was told that the Lions Club was now open, but that they just hadn't found any women or minorities to be members. I joined,

submitted Ann's name as a potential member, and without hesitation she was accepted. Today she is one of the most faithful and long serving members. Joining the Lions was an ordinary activity. But doing so as a black female was doing so under extraordinary circumstances.

When my father needed home health care after a serious operation our family was delighted to know that Ann Thomas had been assigned the case and, as we anticipated, his care could not have been done in a more caring and competent manner.

I believe I mentioned that Ann was still acting as a substitute nurse this summer in one of the school settings. Did I mention that she was caring for youngsters this summer while also undergoing treatments for recurring cancer that probably will get her some day? Or that this summer one of her sons had an unfortunate accident that has left him partially paralyzed? Once again she is doing ordinary activities, serving others, during her own extraordinary circumstances.

Ann was once a little girl amongst many attending the black YWCA. Who would have known that she would

serve on the Board of the integrated YWCA whose stated mission is "Eliminating Racism". Ann was the first black enrollee to a segregated nursing program and eventually served on that hospital's board. As a young girl she set her sights on being a nurse. As an adult she became a board member of an organization whose mission is to recruit minorities into the health related fields. As a child she grew up in a community where blacks couldn't get bank loans. As an adult she served on the board of a bank that gives loans to blacks. As a young girl she observed the subservient role of women in our community. As an adult she serves on the West Virginia Women's Commission.

I've told Ann that she is a role model. I think she assumed I meant that she is a role model for young black kids in our community. Well, yes, she is that. But more importantly she is a role model for all of us in this community. A role model of being a caring, compassionate, skilled professional who knows that you can't control what life gives you, but you can control what you do with what life gives you.

So it is my pleasure to present my colleague, friend, role model and hero....Ann Thomas.