

Wendy's Dave Thomas profile

By Jeff Louderback

Weary from a flight long delayed by inclement weather, Dave Thomas steps out of his corporate jet and minutes later arrives at the Wendy's International headquarters in the posh Columbus suburb of Dublin.

Dressed in blue slacks and a crisp white shirt adorned with a hamburger-emblazoned tie, the bespectacled fast-food entrepreneur and television folk hero listens to an overview of the next day's board meeting as he descends down a staircase and into a makeshift studio where a group of children await.

Thomas, who lives with his wife Lorraine in a spacious Ft. Lauderdale mansion, is here to pose for a photograph that will publicize the release of a postage stamp designed to promote adoption, a cause that is dear to his heart. The children selected for the session are sons and daughters of Wendy's employees, and they recognize the smiling grandfather figure the moment he strides into the room.

"Is that the dude from TV, the one who eats all those hamburgers," one boy excitedly asks his mother. Thomas grins and settles into a chair as the children are draped around him. Between shots, he jokes and laughs with the youngsters - appearing much like the gentle and kindhearted figure featured in Wendy's television commercials.

"What you see is what you get. I think people like him so much because he is sincere," said Lorraine Thomas, who married Dave Thomas in 1954. "He is kind to everyone, no matter if he's known you for years or if you're someone he just met."

The 67-year-old Thomas, who successfully recovered from quadruple bypass surgery performed six days after his heart attack in 1997, is a man of many descriptions. Savvy entrepreneur. Marketing genius. Television star. Best-selling author. Role model. Not surprising for a man who believes that giving time is just as valuable as donating money, philanthropic efforts are an important part of his life. In 1992, he founded the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, one of several organizations to which he lends support. Thomas was instrumental in the United States Postal Service's initiation of the Adoption Stamp, which was unveiled in Los Angeles last month.

"The stamp will not raise funds, but it will create awareness for adoption and the tens of thousands of children who are awaiting permanent and caring homes," said Thomas, who was adopted at six weeks old. He donates the profits from his best-selling autobiography *Dave's Way* and his second book *Well Done!* to the adoption foundation. "Had I not been adopted, I could have been raised in an orphanage and missed out on so many things that had a positive influence on me."

Moments after the photo session is over, Thomas retreats to a leather chair in his office, where the smiling faces of 15 grandchildren beam from portraits on one wall and pictures

of him with celebrities like President Clinton and Jack Nicklaus hang on another. The most recognizable human fast-food icon - Ronald McDonald does not count - takes a sip of diet cola and talks about a time long before he earned his first million and was recognized every place he went. His is an inspirational story about a boy who had little, except the encouragement of an loving adoptive grandmother and dreams about hamburgers and one day owning his own restaurant.

Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1932 to a mother he never knew, Thomas was adopted by a couple in Michigan when he was 6 weeks old. His adoptive mother, died when he was 5, and in the following years his adoptive father struggled to find work. They lived in dirty boarding houses and cramped trailers as Rex Thomas bounced from job to job and state to state. In 10 years, Dave Thomas says, he attended 12 schools.

Summers spent with adoptive grandmother Minnie Sinclair were the fondest memories of his childhood, Thomas recalls. A devout Christian, Sinclair raised four children alone after her husband was killed in a railroad accident. She juggled several jobs to keep a roof over her children's heads. "Hard work is good for the soul," Thomas remembers her saying. "It keeps you from feeling sorry for yourself because you don't have time."

Saturday afternoons were Thomas' favorite time with his grandmother. They drove to downtown Kalamazoo and ate lunch at the counter of a five-and-dime store.

"I remember the swiveling chairs and the people in uniform hustling back and forth preparing and serving the food," said Thomas, who lived with Sinclair during the summer until he was 9. "Even then, I was excited by the atmosphere of a restaurant."

Grandma Sinclair, Thomas says, taught him the value of a hard day's work and the importance of quality. "Don't cut corners," she often said. That credo, according to Thomas, is why Wendy's hamburgers are square, unlike the chain's competitors. "At Wendy's, we don't cut corners," Thomas said in words spoken with pride.

Life with his adoptive father, Thomas admits, was less desirable than summers with Grandma Sinclair. Rarely did father and son eat a home-cooked meal. Mostly, they dined at restaurants where hamburgers and hot dogs were the specialties.

"My father and I didn't talk much, so I spent most of the time in restaurants observing the surroundings," Thomas said. "I remember watching families sitting together and having a good time. To me, eating out wasn't just about the food. It was a special event."

When he was 8, Thomas decided that one day he would have a restaurant where families would flock for the friendly atmosphere and the juicy hamburgers, which have long been his favorite food. To Thomas, a mouthwatering hamburger is more desirable than the tastiest lobster and the choicest flet mignon. "Popeye wasn't my hero," Thomas recalled. "Wimpy was, because he loved hamburgers."

Thomas lived in Indiana when his father remarried a woman with three girls. His oldest stepsister had a job and "seemed to earn respect from bringing home money." So the ambitious 10-year-old boy sought work. The next two years, he had brief stints as a paperboy, a golf caddy and a pinsetter. When his family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee in 1944, Thomas found work at a grocery store.

"I delivered groceries on a bicycle, and didn't like the job much," Thomas explained. "Riding on the hilly streets of Knoxville was a challenge, and it seemed like every time I delivered groceries, it would be to an apartment house on the top of a hill and the customer would live on the fifth floor."

Thomas had worked there a month when the owner closed the store for two weeks when he left for vacation. The owner returned a week early, and summoned Thomas.

"I told him I had already made plans because I thought I would have two weeks off," Thomas said. "When I returned a week later, I saw a 'Help Wanted' sign in the window, and I knew I was fired."

The 12-year-old Thomas pounded the pavement again searching for another job. He found one at Walgreen's, where he mixed sodas and made ice cream floats. His first restaurant job was terminated three weeks later when the manager learned Thomas was 12 and not 16.

"My dad got angry when I told him about Walgreen's. He told me I would never keep a job, that he would have to support me the rest of his life," Thomas said. "From that moment, I was determined to not lose another job. I wanted to prove him wrong."

Thomas strolled down the street one more time and walked into the Regas Restaurant, owned by brothers Frank and George Regas. Again, Thomas said he was 16, and he was hired. He was assigned to the lunch counter with Bill Regas, Frank's son.

"I loved the look of the gray smock coats the white aprons, the white shirts and the ties. I felt like a professional," explained Thomas, whose title is senior chairman and spokesperson. "We didn't carry orders on trays. Instead, I learned to balance plates, cups and saucers on one arm.

The Regas brothers encouraged their employees to "work as if your job depends on every single customer, every day." Thomas followed their advice, earning the respect of his superiors and working seven days a week during the summer and weekends during the school year.

"We would always compete to see who could earn the most money from tips," said Bill Regas, who is co-owner of the Regas Restaurant and two other eateries in Knoxville. "Dave would talk about how someday he would have his own chain of restaurants. His co-workers would snicker and say, 'Sure, Dave, sure.' But he had a vision, and the confidence that he would succeed."

In 1947, when he was 15, Rex Thomas moved his family to Ft. Wayne, Ind., where Dave Thomas was hired as a bus boy at the Hobby House Restaurant. Within weeks, he was promoted to other positions and grew close to Phil Clauss, the Hobby House owner and a man who would offer Thomas the chance to earn his first million.

By summer's end, Rex Thomas moved again. This time, his son did not leave. He rented a room at the YMCA and dropped out of school after finishing the 10th grade, choosing to work full time in the restaurant business rather than earn his high school diploma. After serving in the Army - Thomas was assistant manager of the Enlisted Men's Club at a base in Germany - he returned to the Hobby House in 1953 when he met an 18-year-old waitress named Lorraine Buskirk. He did not make a favorable early impression.

"I was working as a grill man and one day we were so busy I pushed out order after order and kept ringing the bell for her to pick up the food," Thomas said with a smile. "She was picking up the orders fast enough, in my opinion, so I kept ringing that bell over and over."

The spunky young waitress did not appreciate Thomas' approach. "I was holding two plates in my hands," she said with a laugh. "And I told him, 'Would you like me to serve this, or would you like to wear it?'"

The couple started dating and were married a year later. They have five children - Pam, Kenny, Molly, Lori and Melinda Lou (Wendy). Kenny and Wendy have successfully owned and operated Wendy's franchises.

Clauss eventually promoted Thomas to vice president of the Hobby House and a new barbeque restaurant called the Hobby Ranch House in Ft. Wayne. In 1956, Clauss approached Thomas about someone he met at a restaurant convention, a 65-year-old man who drove a white Cadillac, had a neatly-trimmed white mustache and goatee, and walked with a gold-tipped cane. His name was Col. Harland Sanders, and he talked about his secret blend of herbs and spices, and a better way of frying chicken. Col. Sanders would sell his spices and pressure cookers to prepare the chicken in exchange for a nickel for each piece of chicken sold.

"I said to Phil, 'Why should we pay some guy who looks like a billy goat five cents a piece for chicken when we already have good chicken,' Thomas explained with a grin. "It turned out that his chicken took less time to prepare, and customers wanted to see when Kentucky Fried Chicken was all about."

Clauss opened four Kentucky Fried Chicken eateries in Columbus in 1960. A year later, they were struggling to stay afloat and Clauss was \$250,000 in debt with the franchises. He offered Thomas the chance to revive the restaurants, guaranteeing 40 percent ownership of the Columbus locations once he paid off the original \$250,000 investment.

"Phil and Lorraine were the only people who thought I could turn those restaurants around," Thomas said. "Even Col. Sanders thought it wouldn't be a wise move. He thought I was making a big mistake."

With four young children at the time, Thomas leaped at the chance to earn more money and tackle a challenge few people that he could handle. Even Thomas sometimes wondered whether he could turn the restaurants around when he arrived in Columbus in 1962. Sales were dismal, and the eateries had no credit. Even Col. Sanders required cash-on-delivery.

"Listen to the Colonel, boy," Thomas remembers Col. Sanders saying. "As your friend, get out now while you can. Things are just too far gone here."

Thomas had no money for advertising, so he convinced his chicken supplier to fund a newspaper ad, which increased sales. He even exchanged chicken for air time at local television and radio stations. Thomas and Clauss had already devised the idea for placing the chicken in a red-and-white striped bucket with Col. Sanders image prominently displayed. To attract more attention, Thomas hired a graphic designer to create the wobbling chicken bucket sign in front of the restaurant. Col. Sanders liked the sign so much he had them installed at every Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise.

In 1968, Clauss sold the franchises to Kentucky Fried Chicken, a company Col. Sanders no longer owned, and Thomas became a millionaire at 35. He joined KFC as a regional director of operations and then joined Arthur Treacher's Fish and Chips for a short stint, but owning a hamburger restaurant was still on his mind.

Thomas and a close friend, longtime Columbus automobile dealer Lee Immke, often talked about hamburgers as they lounged in a sauna at the Columbus Athletic Club. Immke, Thomas recalls, would lament over the lack of "a good hamburger" in downtown Columbus. Thomas agreed.

On Nov. 15, 1969, Wendy's Old-Fashioned Hamburgers opened its doors at Fifth and Broad Streets in a building owned by Immke. Thomas wanted a wholesome image for his restaurant, so he named it after his red-headed, freckle-faced 8-year-old daughter Melinda Lou, called Wendy by her siblings who could not pronounce her given name.

The decor matched the old-fashioned theme indicated in the restaurant's name. Tiffany glass lamps, hanging beads, turn-of-the advertising on table tops and bentwood chairs composed the atmosphere. Behind the counter, Thomas prepared a simple menu of made-to-order singles, doubles, triples along with chili, french fries and the Frosty Dairy Dessert. At the grand opening, a beaming Wendy charmed Columbus dignitaries in a blue-and-white striped dress with red-and-white striped socks. The dress, which Wendy wore when posing for the restaurant's familiar logo, now is displayed in a glass case at the original eatery, which is now a combination Wendy's and Tim Horton's restaurant and a museum stocked with photos and memorabilia about Thomas and the restaurant's intriguing history.

Initially, Thomas planned a five-location chain in the Columbus area "so my children would have a place to work during the summer." Though skeptics believe there was no room for another hamburger chain, Wendy's rapidly grew. Thomas first franchised his restaurant in 1973, and less than 10 years after the first Columbus eatery opened, Wendy's had 1,000 restaurants in operation. The number has increased to more than 5,500 today with almost 500 more locations presently under construction.

Over the years, Wendy's advertising campaigns have been as classic as the square hamburgers Thomas fashioned. "Hot 'n Juicy," the theme for the restaurant's first nationally televised commercial in 1977, propelled Wendy's name recognition, Thomas believes. Seven years later, retired manicurist Clara Peller became a folk hero when she made "Where's the Beef?" a household phrase.

Pausing for a moment as he takes a sip of diet cola, Thomas studies a certificate that is placed on his desk. It is a notice that the Guinness Book of World Records has recognized him as the founder who has made the most appearances in a television commercial as a spokesperson for his company. Thomas has taped almost 700 Wendy's advertisements - more than former Chrysler icon Lee Iacocca, popcorn pitchman Orville Redenbacher and Col. Sanders combined.

"We have a lot of fun with the commercials, though they involve long hours and lots of takes," said Thomas, whose favorite item at Wendy's is a single with mustard, pickle and onion. "People say the commercials are funny, and that's good. If you use humor, people are more likely to remember your message."

On occasion, Thomas appeared in Wendy's earliest television commercials. He did not become a recognizable spokesperson, though, until 1989. Company executives were unhappy with the advertising campaign at the time, so Thomas was asked to step in "for a few months" until a fresh campaign could be designed.

"When the commercials started airing, focus groups said they liked them because they felt like Dave was talking to them just like a father, a grandfather or a neighbor," Lynch said. "People appreciate that he's not a manufactured personality. He's Dave Thomas, not someone who is playing a role."

The originally planned short stint has turned into an 11-year gig that is still rolling along smoothly. Though he is a member of the Screen Actors Guild, Thomas is quick to say, "I'm not an actor, I'm a spokesman."

Fans who do not know him often wonder if Thomas is as humorous away from the camera as he is on the television screen.

"He is funny," Lorraine Thomas said with a laugh. "But he has good writers."

Every time the likable Thomas walks into a Wendy's restaurant, customers often greet him and ask for an autograph. A recent commercial about the chain's Monterey Ranch

chicken sandwich featured Thomas in an online chat room responding to a posting about the group feeling hungry. His screen name in the commercial was Dave 256.

"The number 256 is a significant piece of Wendy's folklore. It represents how many ways you can make a Wendy's hamburger. It's not Dave's online name, however," Lynch explained. "Apparently, Dave's fans thought that was his actual screen name, and they bombarded some poor guy who was actually Dave 256 with countless messages."

Thomas has earned several awards for his business leadership, and holds honorary degrees from Duke, Clemson and many other universities. Of all his feats, perhaps none is more gratifying than what he achieved in 1993, the year he earned his GED certificate. Coconut Creek High School near Ft. Lauderdale adopted Thomas as a student. He attended the senior prom with Lorraine, and the couple was named honorary king and queen. Thomas was voted "Most Likely to Succeed."

"I didn't feel right talking to high school and college students, encouraging them to stay in school or go back to school, when I hadn't even finished high school," said Thomas, who lives with Lorraine in a spacious Ft. Lauderdale mansion. "My road would've been easier had I stayed in school and gone to college."

As night falls over Dublin, Thomas walks through the headquarters lobby to a waiting car that will take him to his condominium for much-needed rest. In the days ahead, there are more board meetings to attend, commercials to tape, motivational speeches to deliver and adoption awareness to create. Thomas has been showered with several awards and honors, accumulated more wealth than he imagined as a boyhood dreamer and is beloved by millions of admirers. Yet the humble and cordial hamburger king does not think he is special. Nor does he feel his degree of success is unattainable for others.

"There is no reason that a dirt-poor kid like me - a kid who had a jumbled home life and dropped out of school - should have made it. But I did, at least in some ways," said Thomas, whose family has its own island at Buckeye Lake. "Within the laws of God and man, anything is possible. I truly believe people can find their niche and achieve their dreams. I can, you can. Anybody can."

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