

Physician Spotlight



Ruth Thomas, MD

By LYNNE JETER

Ruth Thomas never thought she would attend medical school because it was such a struggle to finish college.

Bright by nature, the problem wasn't academic. With two small children to care for at a young age and a full-time day job, Thomas and her husband struggled with problems most young parents face: lack of time and shoestring finances.

"That's why I was 25 before I graduated from college and 28 before I started medical school," said Thomas, an orthopedic surgeon in Little Rock, and a professor at the University of Arkansas for Medical Science (UAMS).

A Pine Bluff native, Thomas was 11 when her family moved to El Dorado, and relocated permanently to Little Rock when she was 16. Thomas was the third of four children born to Jimmy Walker, an engineer, and his wife, Rita.

Thomas learned lessons about the power of the human spirit from her younger sister, a talented musician who was blind at birth and died 12 years ago from complications related to breast cancer. She learned perseverance by watching her mother return to graduate school in her forties to earn master's degrees in special education and counseling. "Before, she'd worked part-time in the camera department at Sears, so to watch her go back to school and earn two advanced degrees was inspiring," said Thomas.

When Thomas was mulling a course of study at the State College of Arkansas in Conway, her uncle, a geologist, suggested physical therapy. "He suggested physical therapy to me because in the '70s, therapists were in high demand and he knew I could get a job quickly," she said.

At the University of Arkansas in Little Rock, where she completed her undergraduate studies, she took an organic chemistry class as part of a back-up plan to study nursing in case she wasn't accepted into the physical therapy curriculum. There,

Professor Yang played a vital role in her career direction.

"Every time he'd hand back a paper, he'd have scrawled in magic marker across the top 'Go to medical school!'" she recalled. "I'd never thought about it. One day after class, he encouraged me to consider applying. I said, 'Professor Yang, only brilliant students get into medical school,' and he said, 'no, they don't. Try it!'"

After receiving physical therapy training from the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, Thomas joined the Arkansas Children's Hospital.

"I worked there for two years as a physical therapist, working side by side with medical school students, and decided perhaps going to medical school was a possibility after all," she said. "I learned you didn't have to be brilliant, and the orthopedic surgeon I worked with encouraged me to go for it."

Thomas applied to UAMS in the early fall. Accompanying her application was a stellar letter of recommendation from that orthopedic surgeon, Raymond Morrissy, MD. Well known in the pediatric orthopedic world, Morrissy "undoubtedly influenced my selection into the orthopedic program at UAMS," said Thomas.

Weeks after filing her medical school application, Thomas's husband, Terry Nelson, began feeling ill. In late January, he was diagnosed with colon cancer, and died April 14.

"It was a very quick, progressive illness," recalled Thomas, whose children were 7 and 10 years old at the time. "I'd all but forgotten about the medical school application. When I got the letter in March that I'd been accepted, I didn't think much of it. It paled in comparison to what was going on. Before he died, my husband made me promise to go."

Social Security benefits the children received after their father died allowed Thomas to continue mortgage payments, which helped make it possible for her to enroll. A new era began that fall, with Thomas studying medicine by day, parenting by night, and working summers on research grants.

"The death of someone close to you, especially when it's unexpected, can really send you into a funk, and I was really depressed," Thomas admitted. "When I started medical school, it was like being slapped with a wake up call. You have to dance with the music."

When Thomas began her residency in orthopedics, she had to regroup. Because the hours were not as conducive to parenting as medical school had been, she found an unwed mother through a program in her Catholic church to live with the family for a year and help with the children. The next year when she began taking calls

every third night, she had to regroup again.

"I'd tutored a young man from Taiwan whose younger brother, Mien Chen Chen, wanted to come over here," said Thomas. "I needed someone who could stay home with the children, and drive them to and from school, so he lived with us. The children ate more fried rice that year than ever in their lives! My daughter tells stories about him being so tiny that he could barely see above the steering wheel. When he was driving them, she'd crouch down so nobody would see her. She was so embarrassed."

Thomas, who earned a fellowship to Campbell Clinic in Germantown, Tenn., in 1992, recalled the five years of residency being "a bizarre, chaotic time."

"My parents lived nearby and helped when they could," she said. "Sometimes the children stayed with me in the call room and I'd run them to school in the mornings. We got by, but I wouldn't recommend it as a plan of action."

Thomas remarried two years after completing her residency. Her husband, Charles, farms 640 acres near Frazier Pike, close to their eight-acre countryside homestead. "I'd never lived on a farm," said Thomas. "Now I'm spoiled."

Together, they have four children and five grandchildren. His children are 23 and 26; hers are now 37 and 39. Thomas's son, Terry Nelson Jr., the younger of her two, lives nearby. Her daughter, Lora Dawn Greene, a nurse and the mother of three, relocated last year to Wilmington, N.C. "I hated to see her move so far away, but you better believe I'm always checking airfares," said Thomas, who has already made four trips there this year.

Thomas, a staunch supporter of the American Orthopaedic Foot & Ankle Society's (AOFAS) Overseas Outreach Project, also devotes attention to medical mission trips, having traveled on a half dozen organized expeditions to serve the poor and uninsured in Vietnam, Uganda and Honduras.

"It gives you such a sense of fulfillment to work with a team dedicated to healing those in such desperate need," said Thomas. "The patients are so appreciative of your help, and there's not the insurance coding and other worries getting in the way. It's a great feeling of satisfaction to help your fellow man. That's why we (doctors) got in the business in the first place."

Editor's Note: Next month, learn more about the AOFAS Overseas Outreach Project's Vietnam medical mission trips and the involvement of Ruth Thomas, MD, and another Little Rock orthopedic surgeon, Dale Blaiser, MD. "For an international organization that sends a team of eight orthopedic surgeons overseas annually, to have two from Little Rock is quite unique," said Thomas.

To nominate a deserving physician, go to www.medicalnewsofarkansas.com and click on "My Medical News"