

Public Servant

Senior divides his time between classes and Opelousas alderman duties

IF DONALD CRAVINS SR. WERE EVER unable to fulfill his official duties as mayor of Opelousas, La., 20-year-old Brian Thomas would step in to govern the city.



Brian Thomas

Thomas, a UL Lafayette senior majoring in risk management and finance, was elected to represent District A last year. He is the youngest elected official in the history of Opelousas.

And, soon after taking office in January, he was elected mayor pro tempore by his five fellow aldermen. That means he would be acting mayor in Cravins' absence.

"I do not take it lightly. I realize the job that is ahead of me and I am ready to do it," Thomas said.

The possibility of running for political office

had been on his mind since he graduated in May 2004 from Opelousas Senior High School. But it began to crystallize when he took his first economics course as a UL freshman three months later. In that class,

he began to understand how closely government, commerce and citizens' quality of life are interrelated.

"I started attending (Opelousas) City Council meetings that semester," he said.

With a population of about 23,000, Opelousas, La., is the parish seat, or administrative center, of St. Landry Parish. It's governed by an elected mayor and six elected aldermen. All have four-year terms.

Thomas said he tried to learn as much as he could about Opelousas as he began to seriously contemplate running for office. By Spring 2006, he was ready to enter his first political race.

Thomas grew up in District A, where he still lives. His opponent was a 12-year incumbent, Dr. Joseph Guillory.

Although he was taking an 18-hour course load in the Spring 2006 semester, Thomas began to campaign in February 2006 for the September election. He quickly had to learn to juggle his academic responsibilities with his campaign activities.

"Balancing it all was very tough for me. I would get to bed very late and I would wake up very early," he said.

His schedule didn't get much easier when the spring semester ended. He took nine credit hours for the Summer 2006 semester, which is the equivalent of an 18-hour course load in a fall or spring semester.

"Being busy can add structure to your life. It was very tough, but it is not impossible if you have good time management skills," he noted.

On Sept. 30, 2006, Thomas defeated Guillory, garnering 55 percent of the total votes. The victory did not surprise the novice politician.

"I actually expected to win. I did not run to lose. If I did not expect to win, I would have never entered the race," he said, matter-of-factly. "I studied. I looked at all the options. After analyzing every-

thing, I said, 'Okay, this is what I am going to do. I believe I can do it. So, I did it.'"

Although he may have expected to win the race, he did not anticipate what happened next.

"I had a rude awakening that first week (after the election), when my constituents started calling me and telling me everything that they needed. I actually had people start calling me before I took office," he said.

On Jan. 9, 2007, Thomas sat down for his first Council meeting as an alderman.

Some of the issues he is facing as an elected official are the same issues that cities, large and small, across the country have been grappling with since long before he was born. Many are complex and controversial.

At press time, for instance, the Opelousas City Council was considering adoption of an ordinance related to alcohol sales. The measure would require businesses within the city limits, whose revenues from alcohol sales constitute more than 15 percent of their total annual revenue, to stop selling alcohol from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. Bars within the city limits would have to close at 2:30 a.m.

An interesting twist: Thomas is too young to buy alcohol legally.

Few problems that he faces as an alderman have simple solutions. For example,



Alderman Brian Thomas speaks with Alderman Dale Pefferkorn.



the City Council is also wrestling with issues prompted by conflicting land use, since Opelousas does not have zoning laws.

Even good news can have a downside. Thomas noted that there seems to be an increase in business activity in the city.

"We're booming," he summarized. "We need to be reaching out and lobbying for business because we have an abundance of land that has the potential to be developed."

At the same time, rapid growth can sometimes put a burden on municipal infrastructures.

As an alderman, Thomas works with a roughly \$13 million city budget. There are about 200 workers on the city payroll.

According to Associated Press reports in March, an audit of the city's books showed that the city's general fund expenditures outstripped its revenues by more than \$800,000 in 2006. So, Thomas is facing some daunting fiscal challenges.

And, while he is pondering such weighty issues, he must go to class at UL Lafayette and complete projects assigned by his professors. Thomas said his parents, Linda and Carlton Thomas Jr., have always stressed the importance of education. He is the youngest of their four children.

Thomas said that on a typical day, he goes to class, checks his e-mail periodically, reads newspapers and watches news broadcasts to keep up with current events, and returns phone calls. "I drive to Opelousas and ride through my district, making sure that streets are okay. I may talk to some of the department heads in City Hall to make sure things are running smoothly. Sometimes I may speak with the police chief about situations that I may need to be concerned about.

"After I finish with that, it's time for homework. Then I may find some time to have fun with some friends. Maybe."

Another interesting twist: A few of his classmates are also his constituents.

Thomas said he worries that college students don't pay enough attention to current events. "We kind of isolate ourselves in this little academic bubble or this social bubble, and we forget about the rest of the world. But there is a big world out there. There are a lot of things happening and I would hate for certain things to catch us by surprise."

The UL Lafayette student said he expected voters initially to be wary of his abilities because of his age. But he sees his youth as an advantage.

"Youth is a great thing. You have a lot of energy; that energy itself is motivation. You have this naiveté. You think you can change the world. I think that's good because young people do not inherently



LEFT TO RIGHT: Alderman Harvey Darbonne, Alderman Brian Thomas, Alderman Louis Butler Jr., Mayor Donald Cravins Sr., and City Attorney Pride Doran.

know what is supposed to be impossible. In fact, that's what makes us capable of doing the impossible." ■

SGA Offers Donors A Chance to Help Beautify Campus

A STUDENT GOVERNMENT Association project that started out as a way to provide benches near Moody Hall and the Quadrangle has mushroomed.

Benches for Beautification will place benches, tables and trash receptacles across campus.

The project is the brainchild of Bryan Laperouse, a former SGA president for the B.I. Moody III College of Business Administration and recent UL Lafayette graduate. It was intended to improve areas around the College of Business. "But once I brought the idea to the SGA Senate, some students thought it would be unfair to other colleges," he said.

So the project grew and now will be tackled in two phases.

Laperouse has been working with Dr. Ed Dugas, a UL Lafayette professor of health and physical education who retired in 2001, and other mem-



Shown with one of the new benches by Cypress Lake are, from left: freshman Kaitlyn Rowzee of Lafayette; Angelle Babineaux, a sophomore from Arnaudville, La.; and Danielle St. Julien, a senior from St. Martinville, La.

bers of a Benches for Beautification Committee, since then.

"It was a wonderful concept from the start," Dugas said. "The leadership from the student government began this project and is seeing it through."

A \$2,000 donation will place a bench or table at a designated location on campus. Maps detailing available sites have been created by the university's Physical Plant Department.

Phase I of the project will put the seating, tables and trash bins in and

around the Quad, Martin Hall, Moody Hall, F. G. Mouton Hall, Bittle Hall, O. K. Allen Hall and along Cypress Lake near Burke-Hawthorne Hall.

Donors will have the opportunity to choose the location of the bench or table they select and also "name" the bench.

A permanent sign that acknowledges the donation will be engraved and attached to it.

"With these name plates, everyone on campus will see the generosity of this community.

And, some may be inspired to do their own part in keeping our campus beautiful," Dugas said.

Phase II of the project will make other locations available. Funds collected for the benches, tables and receptacles will be placed in an account dedicated to campus improvements.

To make a donation to the Benches for Beautification project, call UL Lafayette's Development Office at (337) 482-0922.

'I ALWAYS DO MY COLLARS FIRST' NOW ON DVD

About 700 people braved heavy rains for the premiere of "I Always Do My Collars First: A Film About Ironing" at Bayou Bijou in late January. That's about twice as many as the campus theater can hold, so hundreds waited for a second showing.

Co-directed by student filmmakers Allison Bohl and Conni Castille, the documentary is the first release by the university's new Cinematic Arts Workshop.

"I Always Do My Collars First" follows four dynamic Cajun women in southwestern Louisiana in their daily lives, illustrating what ironing means to them.

At once funny and poignant, it relies on the rich storytelling voices of the four women, Rookie LeBlanc, Gay Castille, Aunt Be Guidry and Georgie Blanchard.

"Ironing is a nurturing, emotional and learned activity transmitted from mothers to daughters," said Castille, a graduate student in the folklore program at UL Lafayette and the film's writer. "It's performed with aesthetic sensibilities that connect these women to other women in their community."

The film features original music by BonSoir Catin, Anya Burgess, and Dirk Powell, whose work has been featured in movies by Spike Lee, Ang Lee and the Academy Award-winning film "Cold Mountain."

"I Always Do My Collars First: A Film About Ironing" is now available on DVD. It can be purchased from the film's website.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Rookie LeBlanc, Gay Castille, Georgie Blanchard, Aunt Be Guidry

www.collarsfirst.com/about.html

COMMUNITY PROJECTS TEACH LASTING LESSONS

UL LAFAYETTE RECEIVED about \$250,000 this spring to fund nine community service projects that range from helping to restore tourism to testing for mold in homes affected by Hurricane Katrina.

That's more than a third of the total \$618,291 in grants awarded in the first phase of a three-year, \$1.2 million initiative called "ULS Serves." It's intended to increase service-learning at the University of Louisiana System's eight campuses. The funding was provided by Learn and Serve America, a division of the Corporation for National and Community Service in Washington, D.C.

"Often the best instruction students gain is from each other. They look at service-learning not only as service but also meaningful, lasting learning," said Dr. Charles Richard, a UL Lafayette faculty member whose project will enable students to help restore tourism in Acadiana.

Through the nine projects, UL Lafayette students and community partners will help:

- preserve Acadiana's culture and promote tourism recovery;

- plan the expansion of Boys & Girls Clubs in Lafayette;

- provide academic assistance to Lafayette Parish students in grades K-8, with a focus on math skills;

- work with Lafayette Middle School students to create outdoor learning environmental classrooms that focus on coastal ecology and restoration;

- develop nutrition and fitness programs that link children and older adults;

- transform donated materials into functional and artistic items for the Acadiana Outreach Center;

- conduct comprehensive testing of hurricane-affected homes for moisture and mold damage;

- reinstate the 42-year-old tradition of the Deep South Festival of Writers after a four-year absence; and

- help students in hurricane affected low-income elementary schools improve writing skills through art appreciation at



AmeriCorps students will help children improve their writing skills through art appreciation.

the Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum.

"The caliber of projects being funded is a testament to the leadership of our university presidents and the commitment of their faculty to make service-learning a priority," said UL System President Sally Clausen.

"It is a significant step toward our goal for all students to have a meaningful service-learning experience before they graduate."

Design Student's Hot Wheels Win International Competition

THE NEXT SET OF WHEELS that sophomore Andrew Rudolph puts on his Honda Element will be made by a major manufacturer.

But the wheel design is all his.

Rudolph, a second-year industrial design major, won an international competition organized by König Wheels and sponsored by *Modified* magazine, a publication for fans of sport compacts. His prize for contributing to the 2007 König Wheel product line is one of the first sets of wheels made from his design.

"All of the finalists had great designs, but Andrew's rolled over the competition," states an article in the February issue of *Modified*.

Rudolph said "wheels currently in production by König Wheels, architectural elements and concept car wheel design trends" inspired his winning entry. His project began in September as a doodle in a sketchbook. Two days later, it was a 3-D computer model.

A week later, Rudolph found out he had been chosen as one of three finalists.



Andrew Rudolph's winning design

The winner was determined later by public voting on the *Modified* website.

Since the magazine is prepared months before it hits the newsstand, the UL Lafayette student had to wait five months to see his winning wheel design in print. He picked up a copy of the February issue at the UL Lafayette Bookstore on campus.

"It was hard not to shout and dance around in the middle of the bookstore," he said.

Jerry Malinowski, director of the Transportation Studio within UL Lafayette's industrial design program, said students are encouraged to "push the envelope of inquiry and problem solving in the design process."

He noted that one of the projects the Transportation Studio tackled was improving the body design and functionality of cooling UL Lafayette's "Ragin' Bot," a 2005 DaimlerChrysler Jeep Wrangler Rubicon. Ragin' Bot will compete in the DARPA Urban Challenge, a contest to be held in November for autonomous ground vehicles that are capable of maneuvering in a city environment.

Malinowski, who helped design the first Ford Mustang, described Rudolph's work for "Ragin' Bot" as "meritorious."

Rudolph said he's not sure that cars are his primary design interest, "but they definitely appeal to me."