

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." ■