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Annette John-Hall: 'Principal EI' graduates from our urban halls to the national stage



By Annette John-Hall
Inquirer Columnist

I figured it would be only a matter of time before Salome Thomas-EI would graduate from being Philadelphia's Principal to America's Principal.

Anyone who's seen the 45-year-old Thomas-EI - the veteran teacher and administrator who most recently spent three years as principal of Russell Byers Charter School in Center City - knows all too well that his energy and passion can't, and shouldn't, be harnessed.

He needed a national platform, for sure. Like that of Joe Clark, the Paterson, N.J., principal of *Lean on Me* fame, Thomas-EI's life is the stuff of a movie:

Grows up as one of eight siblings raised by a single mom in North Philly projects. Becomes a nationally renowned educator and author of two books, *I Choose to Stay: A Black Teacher Refuses to Desert the Inner City* and *The Immortality of Influence*. Offsets the lure of the streets by molding his students into national chess champions.

Disney had already optioned *I Choose to Stay*. All that was left was to cast homeboy Will Smith as Thomas-EI.

I mean, really. Is there any other choice?

But it hasn't happened. Not yet, anyway.

Besides, Thomas-EI is still adding inspirational chapters to his life.

And now he's catapulted himself to a new place - into the land of Oz.

No, not the Wizard. The Doctor.

Team Oz

If you've ever watched *The Dr. Oz Show*, this season's breakout hit, at 9 a.m. weekdays on CBS3, chances are you've seen Thomas-EI. As the newest member of "Core Team Oz," he has a recurring role as Dr. Oz's healthy-lifestyle motivator.

"I've fallen in love with Principal EI," gushed Dr. Oz, introducing him for the first time.

Maybe it's because of their Philly connection. Mehmet Oz earned an M.D. and an MBA at Penn before making a name for himself as a New York heart surgeon.

Of course, that was before Oprah anointed him as her on-air health guru - and catapulted him to more fame and fortune.

Oz's offer came just after Thomas-EI resigned from Byers.

He says leaving the successful charter was one of the hardest decisions he's ever had to make.

But a three-hour round-trip commute from his Garnet Valley home near Cheyney University was wearing on him - not to mention unraveling his family.

"I always tell parents if they want to keep their kids on the right track, they must sit down and eat with them," says Thomas-EI, a married father of two daughters, 5 and 9, "and I wasn't doing it."

He says the realization hit him like a no-look pass when Macawi, his 9-year-old, demanded he raise the family's basketball hoop to regulation height.

"She could play ball," he says, "and I didn't even know it!"

Still an educator

Though Thomas-EI's not in the classroom anymore, he still gets to teach.

During his Oz debut, he counseled mother and daughter Lalita and Zyanae Paris on the benefits of exercise.

"Concentrate on the honor roll," he told 13-year-old Zyanae, plugging his passion, "and not the hoagie roll."

Since their appearance on the show, Lalita and Zyanae, who live in Northeast Philly, have stayed in contact with Thomas-EI, even working out in his home gym.

"His attitude is so positive," says Lalita, 38, a day-care owner who's dropped two dress sizes. "His whole persona is like, 'You can. You have to. You must.'"

Thomas-EI is smart enough to know what his Dr. Oz connection could mean. After all, just a sprinkling of the Oprah brand could set his future. Especially since the media mogul announced plans to launch her own cable network.

But he's always smart enough not to look too far ahead. So for now, he's also working on finishing his Ph.D. in educational leadership and eventually continuing his mission of helping underperforming schools get better.

And the best part?

"I'm having dinner with my kids," he says, "every night."