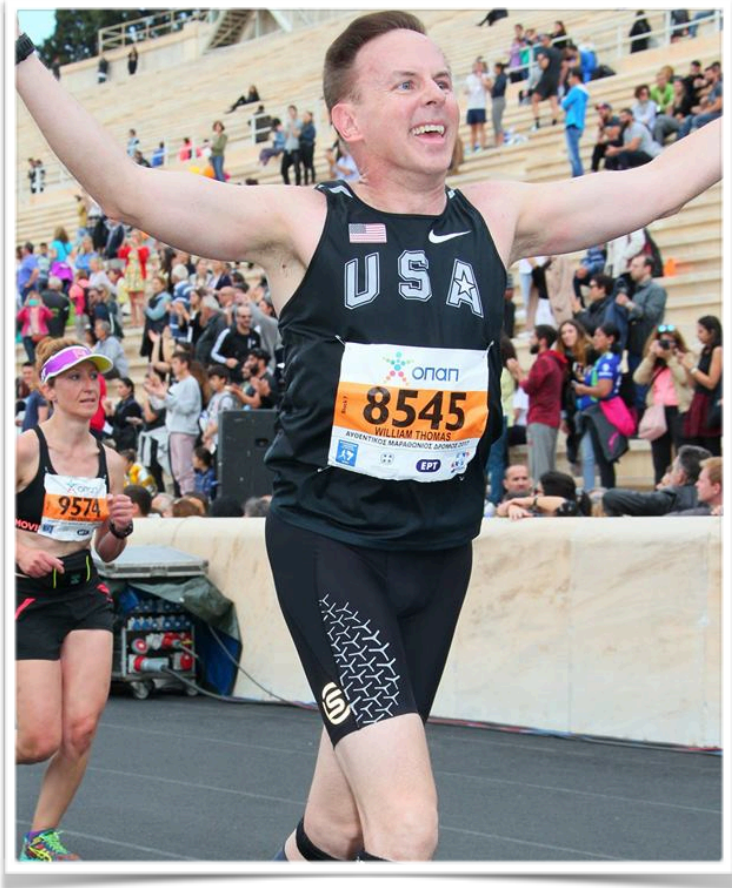


Bellevue
Public
Schools



Alumni
Spotlight



Dr. William Thomas

Bellevue West, 1984

Welcome to our new Alumni Spotlight column where we shine a light on some of the amazing alumni that have graduated from Bellevue Public Schools!

Will Thomas (West, '84) has a long list of notable achievements - a distinguished military career, publishing a book, earning a doctorate and a brief stint as a professor at Georgetown.

However Will has also completed a Marathon Grand Slam - an amazing accomplishment and something that currently only 130 people in the world have ever been able to do.

Will currently resides in the Philippines and recently took some time to answer a few of our questions.

What schools did you attend in Bellevue and what year did you graduate?

I started out at Fort Crook for kindergarten and first grade, when my dad was stationed at Offutt. He returned there during my last two years of high school, so I ended up finishing there as well, graduating from Bellevue West in 1984.

Who was one of your favorite teachers and share why they were your favorite?

Nina Wolford had the biggest impact on me, when I took her AP English class. She really treated us like adults, not only listening to us respectfully and sharing “real world” issues with us, but also holding us to high standards in the way we made a point or explained an idea. Her class was the best prep I could have had for going to college.



What is a good memory you could share from your time in school?

One experience that always stands out was being the drummer in the pit orchestra for “Oliver!,” our spring musical. I think what was so great about that was that my friends tended to come from all over school — the jocks, the band geeks, the student politicians, the ROTC crowd, the drama kids — and when we did the musical, people from all those groups somehow ended up being a part of it. Looking back, it seems like the one time all my social circles collided. That was really fun.

Could you talk about one of your favorite classes and share why you enjoyed it?

In addition to Nina Wolford’s course, I really enjoyed those classes that fit in with extracurricular activities: band with Rodney Schmidt, AFJROTC with Chuck Knight and Roy Jones, and American government with Pete Isaacson (who also coached me on the debate team). What these classes taught me was the ability to take something from the

classroom and apply it in a practical setting, and it's that kind of application that distinguishes a good education from mere memorization.



What did you want to be when you grew up?

I'm not sure what I wanted to be, but I know what I didn't want to be: in the military! Maybe it was the traditional "rebellling against the parents," but I was not looking for that life. When I moved to Bellevue in my junior year I ended up taking AFJROTC, because it would get me out of gym class, and I found that I actually enjoyed that sort of thing. Who knew? That one decision was the foundation for everything that followed.

What did you do after graduating high school?

I went to the University of Virginia on an Air Force ROTC scholarship. I started out as a math major since I'd scored well on the SAT, but soon realized that "math" and "a math test" were two different things! I managed to switch my major to economics and became a much, much happier man. One thing that helped was that, for my Air Force career plans, the specific nature of my degree was not going to be that important.

How many years did you serve in the military? We understand you served in Iraq and Afghanistan and you were also an ICBM Launch Officer. Could you share with us a couple experiences in the Air Force and rank upon retirement?

After UVA I went into the Air Force as an ICBM launch officer in Wyoming. At the time, in 1989, this was "the pointy end of the spear" in the Strategic Air Command, and I had my entire career planned out. Just two months after I started, though, the Berlin Wall came down. I remember thinking, "OK, world peace is awesome, but there goes my career." I wasn't sure what to do next, so I took a position as a professor at the US Air Force Academy teaching military



strategy. Through that experience I realized I wanted to focus on the “low intensity” end of the spectrum, such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping, disaster relief, and other missions; in the mid-1990s people still weren’t paying much attention to these, so I had a chance to have a big role in shaping our military strategy and doctrine over the following years. Ultimately, I got to put my work into practice in Baghdad and Kabul, which was pretty much the opposite experience of what I’d been expecting back in college. I finished my career at the Pentagon in the agency that oversaw the search for and recovery of remains from past wars, which was an incredibly rewarding experience. I was selected for promotion to Colonel, but when the Air Force decided to send me back to Baghdad doing essentially the same job I had done there as a Major, I declined the assignment (and, by extension, the promotion) and retired after 21 years as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Share with us a little about your doctorate degree - what is it in and where did you receive it from?

Each year, every department at the Air Force Academy had the opportunity to send one officer for a PhD, and after my first assignment there I was accepted for one of those slots. I went to George Mason University, outside of Washington DC, to study public policy. Part of the reason I went there was their Program on Peacekeeping Policy, and what I really wanted to investigate was why the military had so much trouble transitioning from the Cold War mindset to a post-Cold War understanding of the world. This was pre-9/11, so a lot of the missions I had been working on were still getting very little attention from the military, and I wanted to understand why. That led me to study organizational culture, a subject that helped me in the military throughout the rest of my career and that has also played a big part in my post-military opportunities, too.

You were a professor at Georgetown. How long were you there and what were some of the classes you taught?

I went to Georgetown to teach in their master's degree in human resource management. I have never worked in HR, but since organizational culture involves people it often gets lumped into HR. Something I learned is that what you study and what the university needs may be two different things, so I taught a course on Data Analysis for HR, and another on Multinational Business Policy & Geopolitics, as well as being an adviser for the master's thesis program. Those courses ultimately set the stage for much of what I'm doing now, as I advise HR leaders in Western and Asian firms throughout Asia.

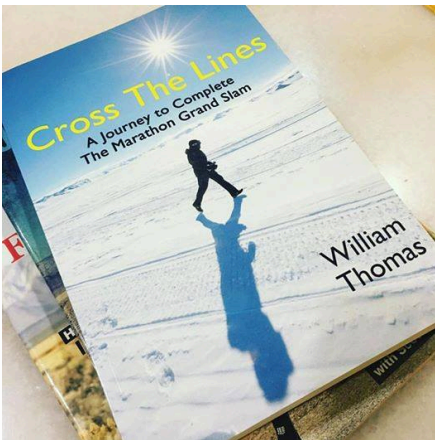


You are one of the only individuals in the world to complete what is known as The Marathon Grand Slam. What is The Marathon Grand Slam? Could you share with us a little about your experience?

Despite being in the military, I was never especially physically fit; that just wasn't my focus. When I was 42, though, I decided I should be in better shape, and thought that at a minimum I should be running. I knew that I would probably get bored and quit, so a friend suggested I sign up for a marathon so I'd have a specific goal. It worked, and I found I really enjoyed the marathon experience, so I kept running them. A couple years later, looking for a new goal, I stumbled across The Marathon Grand Slam: running a marathon on all 7 continents and at the North Pole. This sounded exciting, and since I had only run in North America and Asia at this point, I knew it would take a few years and could keep me motivated to continue running even as my career was changing and I was looking at moving around the world. As I continued running 2-3 marathons per year I kept scheduling races on different continents, going to Paris, Rio, Cape Town, and Sydney. In 2014 I ran the Antarctic Ice Marathon, on a glacier about 600 miles from the South Pole,

and finished my 7th continent. A year and a half later, in April 2016, I traveled to run the North Pole Marathon, which is actually at the North Pole. We ended up getting stranded there for a few days when the ice cracked open and destroyed our runway, but ultimately everything worked out and I completed the Grand Slam. I admit, it still amazes me that I went from being a totally non-athletic teenager — and, frankly, non-athletic adult — to having completed such an unusual athletic experience. Proof, I suppose, that you can really surprise yourself when you take a chance on something new. Anyway, I'm still running, and expect to complete my 30th marathon at next April's Boston Marathon, where I'm running to raise money for IMPACT Melanoma, a non-profit group fighting skin cancer through education and prevention.

You wrote a book about your experiences called “CROSS THE LINES: A Journey to Complete The Marathon Grand Slam.” Tell us about your experience in writing and publishing a book.



When you run a marathon (especially if you're slow like I am) you have a lot of time to think. During a race in Singapore I was thinking about all the things I have learned from running that have shaped my professional and personal lives, and realized there might be something worth sharing. Once I completed the North Pole Marathon I started writing about the running and how it fit in with all the other changes in my life, with a chapter on each of the continents and the North Pole, and a separate chapter called “26.2 Lessons From Running Marathons.” As I wrote it I went back to old blog entries and Facebook posts to trigger the memories, and once I did it was like a particular race had happened just last week. By setting aside a short time each day I was able to finish writing it in about 6 months, and I decided to publish it through a great program Amazon has for independent authors, so it's available in both paperback and Kindle form. I've been able to use this in my work as well; companies often have me come in to give talks based on my running

experiences, as a way to help their folks set goals and overcome challenges along the way.

You are currently living in the Philippines. How long have you lived there and how did you end up there?



While I was at the Pentagon I had a chance to teach as a Fulbright Scholar at a university in Singapore, in their master's degree in security studies. Being a Fulbright Scholar is an amazing opportunity to share ideas and values across cultures, and I learned a lot by teaching in a country that is such a close security partner of the US. After I retired from the Air Force I thought about going back, and when an American consulting firm was expanding their Singapore office, I finished my year at Georgetown and returned to Asia to work with clients all over the region. At the end of 2014 I left that to start my own leadership training and coaching firm, and since I was starting up I decided I should live somewhere other than the most expensive city in Asia! I relocated to Bangkok, which was a good place to live, but due to the language barrier I had very little work there, so I was always flying off to meet clients. Since I was already doing work in Manila, and since the cost of living is about the same as Bangkok's, I moved here about 15 months ago. Every place has its plusses and minuses, but I've learned that if you want to work for yourself, you need to focus more on the plusses and not worry so much about the minuses. I'm not sure where I'll end up in the future, but for now I have a lot of professional opportunities in Asia, and Manila is an inexpensive base of operations, so this is home for the moment.

What message would you like to give to current students in Bellevue Public Schools?

The whole "end of the Cold War" thing was a wakeup call, teaching me a valuable lesson about betting too much on things I can't control. While I think it's important to have a plan — I mean, I did become a planner, after all — I learned that conditions can change without you having any say in



them, so it's best to set yourself up to take advantage of new opportunities rather than focusing only on a single path. Always keep learning, and always be open to exploring new experiences. Remember too that you know yourself better than anyone else does, so spend more time listening to that little voice inside your head, and less time listening to what other people are telling you about yourself. If there are things you want to do in life, and you are confident that you can do the work to make them happen, then go for it.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about your life or your memories of Bellevue?

One great thing about going to school in Bellevue is that, with the Air Force there and with all the global firms operating around Omaha, you can be exposed to more ideas than you would find in a more isolated city. It can really set you up with a much bigger perspective of the world and all the possibilities it offers.

Links, Next Page

Links

Running the 2019 Boston Marathon for IMPACT Melanoma

www.crowdrise.com/drwilliamthomas

CROSS THE LINES: A Journey to Complete The Marathon Grand Slam

https://www.amazon.com/Cross-Lines-Journey-Complete-Marathon/dp/0998216801/ref=sr_1_1

Facebook Athlete Page

www.facebook.com/DrWilliamThomas

About Us

The Alumni Spotlight is a recurring feature on the Alumni Association Facebook Page. If you know of a Bellevue graduate that we should shine the spotlight on, please reach out to us and they will be considered for a future column. Continue to invite your friends and family to Like and Follow our Alumni Association page: <https://www.facebook.com/BPSAlumni>

