



Beatrice Ann Thomas - *Education and Religion*

Born July 9, 1938, Beatrice Ann Thomas was just six months old when her mother moved to Wheeling from a North Carolina tobacco farm to help Ann's aunt and uncle run the New Dixie Restaurant on Chapline Street. Ann grew up in Wheeling during the turbulent years of Jim Crow and the transition from segregation to desegregation. From first grade on, she attended Black-students-only Lincoln School. But thanks to the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), her mother's encouragement, and Ann's perseverance, intelligence and hard work, she graduated from integrated Wheeling High School in 1956 having completed all the necessary prerequisites to pursue a nursing career.

After graduation, Ann started working as a nursing aide at the old North Wheeling Hospital. When her attempt to further her education and enter nursing school was discouraged by hospital leadership, Ann, with the blessing of her mother, applied and was accepted at Ohio Valley General Hospital, later known as Ohio Valley Medical Center. In 1956 she became the first Black student ever enrolled in the School of Nursing at OVMC, and she became its first Black graduate in 1959. She passed her state licensing exams with flying colors, was certified as an RN, and against all obstacles to the contrary, began to fulfill her calling as a nurse. Ann worked at Ohio Valley General Hospital for 12 years, and then became an Ohio County school nurse in 1971, serving on all the school campuses at one time or another during her 30 years in health care. After her retirement in 2001, she continued to serve as a substitute nurse for both Ohio County Schools and Marshall County Schools for many more years.

During Ann's long and distinguished career as a nurse she also served on numerous boards and commissions, including those of the Wheeling YWCA, Ohio Valley Medical Center, Wheeling Health Right, BB&T Bank, Laughlin Memorial Chapel, Housing Connection, the Regional Economic Development Authority, the West Virginia Regional Health Science and Technology Academy, the West

Virginia Women's Commission, and the governing board of West Liberty University. Ann also was a dedicated patron, friend and supporter of the Wheeling-Ohio County Public Library and its programs, so much so that an annual memorial lecture series has been established at the library in her honor.

Ann was married to Clyde Thomas in 1960, and they had two sons, Shawn (1961) and Scott (1965). Clyde was an all-American halfback at Ohio University, and a standout player for the Wheeling Ironmen semi-pro football team. Clyde was elected to the Wheeling City Council and served four terms, including a stint as vice-mayor.

Ann was a role model and inspiration for young Black youngsters in the community, but also for everyone. She was a beautiful soul who modeled caring, compassion, generosity, professionalism, and the pure joy of living. Ann was a pioneer and witness to history who throughout her lifetime overcame countless obstacles of racism and discrimination with strength, determination, optimism, humor, grit, and grace. She served her patients, colleagues, students, teachers, schools, and community, both professionally and as a volunteer, making Wheeling a better place to live in for people of all colors, abilities, faiths, and world-views.

Ann passed away February 22, 2019, having bravely battled cancer for many years while still maintaining her post-retirement service to her community.