



**Henry "Hank" Thomas** is best known as an American civil rights activist and one of the original thirteen Freedom Riders, men and women who bravely boarded the first Greyhound bus that traveled the South in 1961 to protest segregation.

Born in Jacksonville, Florida, Mr. Thomas grew up in St. Augustine, Florida, where he participated in sit-ins and sat in city bus seats reserved for whites only. As a student at Howard University in Washington, D.C., Mr. Thomas became one of the founders and an active participant in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a student arm of the civil rights movement, as well as a frequent participant in sit-in demonstrations in Maryland and Virginia.

During his now-legendary first Freedom Ride through Anniston, Alabama, Mr. Thomas and his fellow activists encountered an angry mob that torched their bus and beat passengers with baseball bats, only to be turned away at a local hospital when taken there for medical help. Shaken, but more determined, Mr. Thomas participated in a second Freedom Ride just ten days later and was incarcerated and sent to Parchman State Prison Farm, reputed to be one of the most dangerous prisons systems in the nation.

During his activism in the early 1960s, Mr. Thomas encountered and survived lynch mobs, beatings and 22 arrests by law enforcement officials in South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi, often finding rescue and refuge from local African Americans and sympathetic college students and faculty. When asked about his 22 arrests, Mr. Thomas says he wears them like a badge of honor.

In 1961, in Winnsboro, SC, Mr. Thomas was arrested for using a "White-only" restroom. Later that night police took him from jail and delivered him to a waiting Klansmen mob determined to lynch him. Once again, Hank Thomas found himself threatened with death as he was ordered out of the car at gunpoint. Once he emerged from the car, he took off running, eluding his captors and eventually being picked up by a Black man who had been watching the police.

In 1966, Mr. Thomas served his country in Vietnam, during which time he was wounded and left for dead before spending six months recovering at Walter Reed Army Hospital. He is the recipient of the Purple Heart, and in 1993 was one of three soldiers to return to Vietnam for a reconciliation meeting with North Vietnamese veterans, during which he came face to face with his former enemies.

Mr. Thomas began his successful business career as a partner in a Laundromat business. He later became a franchisee in fast food restaurants including Wish Bone Fried Chicken, Dairy Queen, Burger King. He eventually became a franchisee of nine McDonald's restaurants. Today, he owns two Marriot Fairfield Inn hotels, and has been featured in business and trade magazines for his success as an entrepreneur in the lodging industry.

Mr. Thomas is the recipient of numerous awards including the International Civil Rights Walk of Fame, the Trumpet Awards, the Atlanta Business League Men of Influence Hall of Fame, and the McDonald's 365 Black Award. He is a life member of the NCAACP, and an active fundraiser for the United Negro College Fund. He also serves on several boards including Morehouse School of Medicine, Talladega College, Tougaloo College, and the Atlanta Youth Academy; and he has established scholarships at the Piney Woods Boarding School in Jackson, Mississippi, Howard University, Morehouse School of Medicine, and Talladega College.

Often featured in civil rights documentaries, Mr. Thomas has also made guest appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show; the CNN Special, "The Sixties;" and served as the voice in Lee Daniels' film, "The Butler."

Mr. Thomas is married to the love of his life and business partner of over 30 years, Mrs. Yvonne Thomas, and they reside in Stone Mountain, Georgia. He is the father of two adult daughters, four grandchildren and one great granddaughter.