

# HS theater teacher retires after 30 years

### Known for his devotion to students

BY SARAH LAMORTE  
STAFF WRITER

For a man who originally didn't want to teach high school theater, John Thomas became irreplaceable to performing arts in the local community.

After three decades as Robert C. Hanes Theatre's manager at Chapel Hill High School, Thomas retired this year.

"Unlike most people I spent a whole 30-year career in a single room," Thomas said.

Thomas, who is known as "JT," was a major part of performing arts at the school and in local community theater.

"I like to feel I was instrumental," he said.

Jeff Howard, a past student of Thomas' technical theater class, is going to speak at his retirement party today at Hanes Theatre.

"He played a big part in my high school career, especially at the end. He gave me something I excel in."

Howard credited Thomas for the skills that helped him get a job at Wright Auditorium at East Carolina University as lead tech and assistant manager during college.

"I was in charge of the house, doing lighting, sounds, setting up for the shows, all stuff I learned from JT," Howard said.

Thomas helped to build a phenomenal performing arts program at Chapel Hill High, said Lisa Hirsh, former president and active member of Performing Arts Lovers, a booster club for the school.

Thomas was an asset to the school with his many years of experience and strong education background, said Thomas Drago, arts director at Hanes Theatre.

"He was very much a mentor for me and the students," Drago said.

Thomas came to the area in 1976 to start a community theater program and help establish opportunities for local nonprofessional actors at what became The Carrboro ArtsCenter.

Thomas said that it was the area's only community theater.

"After about two or three years I had to get a real job," he said.

He was hired in 1978 to manage Hanes.

Thomas is legendary for his impact on students, Hirsh said.

"His devotion is incredible and it is one of the many reasons students love him so much apart from the craftsmanship they learn from him," Hirsh said.

Thomas said that a lot of his students have gone on to work on Broadway or theater elsewhere.

One of his technical theater students became the first woman



John Thomas came to the area in 1976 to establish opportunities for amateur actors.

to join the Broadway stagehands union, Thomas said.

Thomas is incredibly talented as a theater artist, designing lighting and scenery for productions at Hanes Theatre, Hirsh said.

Thomas plans to continue working in freelance lighting design, particularly with lighting for dance performances in the area.

He is also joining his wife in a landscaping business, which he compared to working with a drama director or choreographer.

"As a designer, you are trying to help another artist create their vision," he said.

Thomas said he feels fortunate to have worked in a community with a strong commitment to art education in the public school system.

"I think that really the most important thing we do, as educators, is offer everybody some grounding in the arts because of the enormous value it's going to have in every aspect in their life, for the rest of their life."

Contact the City Editor at [citydesk@unc.edu](mailto:citydesk@unc.edu).

# Officials say gang activity increasing at Halloween

### Town moving to downsize festivities

BY MARK ABADI  
STAFF WRITER

There are plenty of reasons town officials want to tone down the Halloween celebration on Franklin Street: overcrowding, security risks and high costs, to name a few.

But the Chapel Hill Police Department recently indicated another threat: gang activity.

The annual celebration, which attracted about 80,000 partygoers last year and is not sponsored by the town, is being downsized after police noticed an increasing number of who they say are gang members making appearances in the crowd.

"Typically what you see is these guys standing in a big circle and intimidating others, daring them to walk through their circle," said Brian Curran, chief of the Chapel Hill Police Department.

As a result of the skyrocketing Halloween crowd, Chapel Hill police began enlisting the help of nearby departments.

People were identified as gang members by police from neighboring Durham, Wake and Chatham counties.

"They are just pointing out different groups as they see them," Curran said.

He stated that as the crowd dissipates, the potential for gang-related incidents increases.

"As the night wears on and the students leave, these guys stay," he said.

Chapel Hill Parks and Recreation Director Butch Kisiah said the tone of the celebration changes as the night progresses.

"At around 10:30 in the evening you can see a definite change in the atmosphere of the event," he said. "The vast majority of folks are no longer in costume."

"It's an issue of public safety at that point."

The issue of gang activity on Halloween night was raised in a memorandum to the town manager Sept. 22 explaining the need to shrink the festivities.

The report, coauthored by Curran and Kisiah, includes the observation of "criminal street gang members mingling throughout the crowd."

Police are hoping the changes this year will discourage gang members from attending, but they cannot exclude alleged gang members from the event.

"It's not illegal to be in a gang," Curran said.

Among the recommendations for managing the Halloween crowd

*"Typically what you see is these guys standing in a big circle and intimidating others."*

BRIAN CURRAN, POLICE CHIEF

were discontinuing Chapel Hill Transit shuttle service to Franklin Street and limiting the sale of alcoholic beverages at local bars.

While these actions would not directly target street gangs, Kisiah said they would help regulate crowd size, which would lead to fewer potential conflicts.

Halloween is on a Friday this year and officials had expressed concerns that the festivities would be bigger than usual, with last year's turnout at or exceeding 20,000 more people than the population of Chapel Hill.

Kisiah said he understood making the event smaller will take years.

"There's no magic bullet that will fix it overnight," Kisiah said. "Hopefully we'll get it to where it is a community-friendly event."

"The thing is, if you don't try anything it will stay the way it is."

Contact the City Editor at [citydesk@unc.edu](mailto:citydesk@unc.edu).

# Duke trustees close meetings

### Cited inefficiency at its open sessions

BY JOHANNA YUEH  
STAFF WRITER

When Duke University's Board of Trustees meets this weekend, there won't be the usual press conference for public questions.

The change comes after a formerly open informational session was closed last May.

"This is the first time they really haven't provided openness," said Chelsea Allison, editor of Duke student newspaper The Chronicle.

"At this point, they really can't get more private."

Duke's BOT decided to fully close its meetings after a review found the open sessions to be inefficient.

"The open session was not conducive to the kind of discussion and interchange the Board of Trustees was interested in having," said Michael Schoenfeld, Duke's vice president of public affairs and government relations.

UNC-Chapel Hill's BOT is required by N.C. open government laws to hold open meetings because the board represents a public institution.

"They are the representatives of the people," said UNC journalism professor Ruth Walden.

"In a sovereign democracy, the people have the right — indeed, they have the responsibility — to

see how the officials they've chosen do their business. There is no other way."

UNC BOT Chairman Roger Perry said that trustees always put aside a few minutes at the end of meetings for a closed session, "but 90 percent of our meetings are always open."

State law exceptions allow UNC to conduct legal and personnel business in closed meetings.

Duke's BOT has an obligation only to Duke's own stakeholders — unlike UNC, which serves the state.

"Private universities don't take any public funds," Perry said. "They're not constituted or operated by the public."

Allison said she's concerned about the limits on access to the board.

"The trustees are entrusted with the university's future. By doing away with the press conferences and open sessions, they're preventing anyone from questioning them."

Schoenfeld said that about 95 percent of Duke's BOT meetings already were closed before the new policy and that few private institutions hold any open sessions.

"Boards of trustees of universities are charged with reviewing and analyzing and ultimately acting on a wide range of issues that

*"It's extremely productive for ... the University that we conduct our meetings in the open."*

ROGER PERRY, UNC BOT CHAIRMAN

are usually very complicated and that require a lot of deliberation among trustees," Schoenfeld said. "That's why it's very rare to have open meetings."

But Perry said he likes that public schools operate openly.

"I think it's extremely productive for the people of North Carolina and the University that we conduct our meetings in the open," Perry said.

Schoenfeld said Duke will continue providing public statements on board activities and decisions. Students and faculty also have representation on board committees.

"This does not change the university's commitment to transparency," Schoenfeld said.

But Allison said she doesn't think the reports are enough.

"The discourse and contention doesn't make it into them," she said. "It's a huge disappointment for The Chronicle, but it's an equally important loss for the community."

Contact the State & National Editor at [stntdesk@unc.edu](mailto:stntdesk@unc.edu).

# N.C. volunteers welcome refugees

BY STEPHANIE METZEN  
STAFF WRITER

Political and religious oppression is sending scores of refugees to the Triangle area from Africa, Iraq and Burma.

They are attracted to ample research and job opportunities. About 8,500 are accepting assistance from local organizations as they acclimate to their new home.

For many refugees, the biggest concern is learning the language.

Morgan Price, project coordinator for the N.C. chapter of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, said that refugees welcome to the U.S. for a variety of reasons and most of the local refugees are coming from Burma.

"There is an oppressive government. Some people say things like they're having land taken away from them, or are being used as a porter, or there's no political freedom."

Price's organization offers English tutoring as well as a mentoring program that matches volunteers with a family for at least six months to introduce the refugees

to the area.

The mentors help families use the bus system and find community activities. Most importantly, the mentors provide stable and friendly faces in an unknown land.

"All of our volunteers are awesome," Price said. "With so many people, it is difficult to form those one-on-one relationships."

Raley White, a UNC sophomore who volunteers with the chapter, said that he became involved when he met Price last year.

"I enjoy being an ambassador for learning about American culture, and I help them to feel more welcome in the country," White said.

White said many families have trouble fitting into new communities because of language constraints and discrimination but that tutors can help families meet friendly people and hopefully make the transition easier.

"Their reaction to me has been nothing but happiness in me being there," he said. "They are so grateful that when I insist that they don't give me some food, they give

me some food.

Even though they have so little, it is heartwarming they would give some."

Mayra Hayes, the Guilford County School English as a Second Language director, said that in the last five and a half years she has seen approximately 45 percent more refugees. The county has to accommodate more than 135 languages.

Lacey Hendrix, volunteer church coordinator for World Relief North Carolina, said her organization is working with 71 refugees.

"For the next years we help where we can," Hendrix said. "There is a process of them learning American culture and speaking up for themselves."

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