

# 'Inspirational' leader speaking out, moving full speed ahead

By Yi-Hsin Chang  
Staff Writer

She answers the phone call, sitting behind a desk in the Sonja H. Stone Black Cultural Center in a beige wool sweater with a deer design, long skirt and high, brown boots. She makes an appointment for 3:15 p.m., hangs up, then lights up a cigarette. "I've had a stressful day," she says.

It's not hard to see why Michelle Thomas feels stressed. A senior African and Afro-American studies major from Laurinburg, Thomas overloads her schedule with, among other things, meetings for the Black Student Movement, the Collegiate Black Caucus and Communiversity.

Thomas serves as CBC co-president, BSM political activism chairwoman, BCC student ambassador, Communiversity co-founder and vice president of Kawaida, the Afro-American studies club. She is also a member of the Sonja Stone Task Force and the BCC Advisory Board.

Last year Thomas was awarded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship in recognition for outstanding leadership, academics and service at UNC.

In addition to her BCC ties, Thomas also works as an office assistant in the center, where many of her meetings are held. Her friends know she practically lives there.

A tall man with a blue jacket shakes his head at her, staring at the cigarette in her hand. "What? This is only my

second one today," she says in answer to his dirty look. He shakes his head; he is her "trainer," trying to help her get back in shape.

She was in top shape four years ago. In December of her high school senior year, Thomas joined the Army Reserves and attended reserve drills on weekends.

"I joined because I wanted to go to college, and my parents could not afford to finance it," she said. "The reserves was basically the only option that I had that I knew of at the time."

Two weeks after her high school graduation, Thomas left for the summer for basic training. She had a week after training to rest and prepare for college. Then she came to Carolina.

Initially planning to major in business, she changed to political science. "But then I met Dr. Stone, and all that changed," Thomas said. She decided to major in African and Afro-American studies.

"Dr. Stone introduced me to the beauty of my culture," Thomas said. "She taught me by example the self-gratification that comes through working in the community."

"She was my friend and my mentor. She was always my professor because even when we were in a personal set-



Profile



Michelle Thomas dedicates time and energy to the BCC

DTH/Delbie Stengel

ting, I was learning from her." Margo Crawford, BCC director, said she got to know Thomas after Stone's death in August. "I knew of her because Sonja had told me what an exceptional person she was," Crawford said. "Sonja was very impressed by Michelle's dedication to humanity."

Last January, Thomas was called to active duty for the Persian Gulf War, one day after she received the King scholarship. She reported to Fort Bragg a week later.

"Sonja was so concerned about Michelle when she was called to duty," Crawford said. "It was like Michelle was her own daughter."

Thomas said she never was deployed in the Middle East. Instead, she stayed at Fort Bragg for six months processing troops preparing to go to Saudi Arabia.

On Aug. 10, a few weeks after Thomas returned to Chapel Hill, Stone died. "It was a time of trying to cope and deal with feelings yet organize and try to do

things that she would've wanted if she were still alive, continuing the legacy," Thomas said.

Denise Matthewson, co-chairwoman of the Sonja Stone Task Force, said Thomas was very passionate and dedicated. "She keeps the energy going," Matthewson said.

Someone comes in to show her an article in College Digest. She says she'll read it when she gets the chance. Ten minutes later a friend who volunteered for Communiversity appears. Michelle tells him the program is being postponed. He asks why. She doesn't know. She's going to find out at 3:15 p.m.

Thomas founded Communiversity, a weekend school to teach disadvantaged African-American children about their history and heritage, and recruited faculty and students to devote 10 Saturdays to the program, Crawford said. "I am an educator of 25 years, and Michelle is extremely outstanding given all the experience I've had," she said.

## Streeter

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job," he said. "I think it's best to remind the constituents of that."

As RHA president Streeter would work for more advances in minority issues, he said.

"We have the racial diversity proposal," he said. "I know that would be one of my main things."

The racial diversity plan, which goes into effect for fall semester, reserves rooms in North Campus residence halls for black students who want to move. But Streeter said he would like to include minorities other than blacks in the diversity plan.

"Eventually you're going to have to look at other minorities," he said. "It's going to be a major task. I'm looking toward it."

Streeter said he did not think the program was a quota plan. "If I didn't know the background, I might," he said. "(But) I don't see it as a quota."

A minority resource library and minority programs would help students adjust to the new plan, Streeter said.

Streeter said he also wanted to promote RHA and to get students involved

because many students didn't realize what RHA was.

"I feel that you need to go out and recruit people," Streeter said. "I think the president needs to get out there and maybe set up a table in the Pit. During orientation, we need to say 'This is who we are, and we want you to get involved.'"

Strengthening present RHA programs such as the quiz file, recycling and computer labs also is an important goal, he said.

Reinstating the Faculty Fellows Program, a program in which faculty members speak to students in the residence halls, would benefit students. "It was a basis for students to get to know people who they normally would not," he said.

RHA has worked with Instructional Technologies to develop computer labs on South Campus, but the group should work now on the rest of the residence halls, Streeter said.

"RHA has done things with them in the past to open South Campus labs," he said. "Now it's time to look toward North Campus."

## Davis

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grams to help make the transition smooth.

"I think initially there will be tension," she said. "(But) once the community is created, I think the tension will wear off."

Davis, a Connor Residence Hall resident, served as a hall senator and is now area governor for Henderson Residence College, chairwoman of the RHA Enhancement Committee and member of the Housing Advisory Board Visitation Subcommittee. She also is a member of the attorney general's staff and was a Daily Tar Heel staff member for one year.

Visitation policy revision also would be an important goal, Davis said. The policy prohibits overnight guests of the opposite sex, but the policy should be rewritten without the mention of gender, she said.

"Critics of the visitation policy argue that it's unenforceable, that it's an attempt to impose morals on adults," she said. "Some people have even gone as far as to say it's discriminatory against heterosexuals."

"I think that two or three adults can sit down at the beginning of the year and come to some agreement as to what their visitation policy should be."

Davis' platform also includes working with the Department of University Housing to make it easier for upperclassmen to move from South Campus residence halls to those in other regions.

"For the first time in years, capacity in north region is not full," Davis said. "I think the way to keep upperclassmen in the residence halls is to make it easier for them to get the rooms they want."

RHA should continue working with the Tar Heel Recycling Program but should become more actively involved, she said. "I think recycling is very accessible," Davis said. "My only concern is that it's not being picked up enough."

Students are recycling so much that volunteers who pick up the material cannot handle the load, she said. RHA and residence hall governments should help TARP empty the containers to control the overflow.

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"She's in a category with Dr. King and Sonja Stone. She's a straight line. She's very thorough. After she collects the facts, then she makes a decision about what she's going to do about it. She is like King because she is so spiritual about things, ... and she's an amazing negotiator."

Thomas said Malcolm X was her favorite African-American leader. "He was a very charismatic, honest, straightforward, look you in the eye and tell you exactly how he feels and then maybe give you a smile kind of guy," she said. "I love that about him, and I do try to be that way because I've learned that as a leader everyone does not have to like you. It's better to be respected than to be liked."

She is respected and liked by friends at the University and in the community. BSM President Arnie Epps said Thomas did not hesitate to tell people where she stood. "People may not like what she says, but they respect the person the words are coming from," Epps said.

"Michelle's a worker. A lot of times you can lead and not be president, and Michelle is just that. She leads by example, not by title."

Denise Beal, service coordinator of the a.p.p.l.e.s. program, met Thomas at a BSM meeting last fall. "She is a phenomenal person," Beal said. "People who associate with Michelle get a certain kind of strength from her."

"It's people like Michelle who hold the campus accountable to the community," James Brittain, president of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro chapter of the NAACP, was so impressed by Thomas that he asked her to speak at the chapter's King birthday celebration.

"There aren't many people who will stand up and say what they believe in," Brittain said. "It takes a lot of courage. It takes a lot of fortitude to speak out."

Thomas' speech was very well received, he said. "I've had responses from all over the community based on what she said and what some other people who spoke said. It's inspired them to become more involved."

Even though Thomas comes from a mixed background — her mother is French, and her father is black — she was always taught that she was black and that she should be proud of it, she said.

"My birth certificate says I'm black," Thomas said. "There's never been any doubt as to my blackness."

Thomas' mother, Roselyn Thomas, who lives in Laurinburg, said people picked on her daughter because she was mixed. "But she was always very concerned about people," Roselyn Thomas said. "When she was a child and she had a dollar and she saw someone hungry, she would give it to them."

Thomas said her goal was to get a master's degree in sociology and a doctorate in black studies. Then she would like to do research, write and be a professor in Afro-American studies.

"I'd like to teach at a historically black college because traditionally black schools are a very significant part of the African-American community and history," she said. "Teaching at a historically black college would, hopefully, be a contribution — a giving back."

Crawford predicted leadership and success for Thomas. "I think wherever she decides to go, the community there will realize what a wonderful asset they have in her," Crawford said. "She's going to play a big role in leading the African-American community."

A woman sits patiently, waiting for a moment of Michelle's time. She can only promise her 10 minutes. At 3:15 p.m., she's going to find out what's keeping Communiversity from proceeding as planned. Then she'll figure out where to go from there.

## Campus Calendar

- WEDNESDAY**  
NOON: Black Faculty/Staff Caucus will sponsor a "Community Forum" in 212 Peabody.  
3:30 p.m. Study Abroad will have an informational session about programs in China in 205 Union.  
Job Hunt 104: "It's A Jungle Out There" workshop for seniors and graduate students. 210 Hanes.  
Resume writing workshop in 306 Hanes for underclassmen interested in internships.  
Ridgefield Action Project. Morehead Planetarium.  
4 p.m. N.C. Fellows Leadership Development Program will hold an open house in 224 Union.  
Undergraduate Sociology Club will discuss upcoming semester activities in 152 Hamilton.  
4:30 p.m. UNC Study Abroad will have information session on programs in Brazil, lower level of Caldwell Hall.  
5 p.m. Job Hunt 101: "Orientation" provides information on how to use the UCPPS office to seniors and graduate students in 210 Hanes.  
UNC Vegetarian Society invites everyone to a free feast in Carmichael Ballroom.  
AHSRC will hold a general body meeting. Check Union Desk for room number.  
5:15 p.m. Asian Students Association, 206 Union.  
5:30 p.m. Communion service at Lutheran Campus Ministry.  
6 p.m. UNITAS invites everyone to a discussion on "Dessa Rose," fifth floor of Carmichael dom.  
6:15 p.m. Meal at Lutheran Campus Ministry.  
6:45 p.m. UNC Pre-Law Club is having a tour of the law school, and Dean Elizabeth Furr will discuss admissions in the law school lobby.  
7 p.m. Volunteer Action Center will sponsor a speaker from the Association of Retarded Citizens will discuss ARC volunteer opportunities.  
Presentation by Public Financial Management will be held in 219 Hanes. Sponsored by UCPPS.  
Operation Smile, Campus Y Resource Center.  
UNC Shag Club is offering a workshop in the basement of Mangum Residence Hall.  
7:30 p.m. Come watch first two rounds of the 1992 Slam Dunk Contest in Carmichael Auditorium. Contestants sign up in the CAA office, Suite A Union.  
UNC Investment Club will have an informal meeting open to all majors in T-2 New Carroll.  
Carolina Indian Circle, Campus Y Lounge.  
Presentation by the Trust Company Bank will be held in Ballroom C of the Carolina Inn.  
Muslim Students' Association welcomes everyone to hear Maher Kothari lecture about "From Hinduism to Islam" in 226 Union.  
8 p.m. Amnesty International Student Action Group will meet in 205 Union to watch "You Could Be Arrested" and to discuss future business.  
UNC-Soviet Exchange, Union Gallery.

## Corrections

In the Jan. 27 Daily Tar Heel, there are two corrections.  
In the article, "Students to cast their ballots in Feb. 11 campus elections," the number of Carolina Athletic Association cabinet members was incorrect. The number varies from year to year, and there are 18 this year.  
In the article, "Union accepts applications for president," the number of students on the Carolina Union Board of Directors is 12.  
In the Jan. 28 Daily Tar Heel article, "Bounds, Toll say working as a team will get the job done," it should have been stated that Toll has only applied to work as a research assistant at Newsweek and Fortune magazines.  
The DTH regrets the errors.

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