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For BC Junior Cai Thomas, Film Is Ideal Medium to Tell a Story

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By KATHLEEN SULLIVAN | CHRONICLE STAFF

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Junior Cai Thomas says being named the 2015 Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Scholarship winner is “beyond amazing.”

“Obviously, MLK was a phenomenal man and to have my name mentioned in the same sentence with him is incredible,” said Thomas, who has visited the King Memorial in Washington, DC, and remembers seeing the hotel in Memphis where the civil rights leader was shot. “I think [people] are now expecting more of me, but if you really want to be excellent in life, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

The annual scholarship, presented to a Boston College junior who has demonstrated superior academic achievement, extracurricular leadership, community service and involvement with the African American community and African American issues, was awarded to Thomas at a dinner last month honoring all the finalists [[see separate story](#)].

A communication and film studies double major, Thomas has produced and directed a number of film projects, including an eight-part documentary chronicling last year’s Robsham Theater production of “For Colored Girls.” She recently completed a documentary on 2013 BC alumna Blake Bolden, a black professional hockey player for the Boston Blades. Thomas shadowed Bolden for a month, following her from the ice to the locker room to her day job at Innercity Weightlifting, which provides young adults with an alternative to violence and gangs.

“I always had an interest in telling stories, though I didn’t know it would specifically involve filmmaking,” said Thomas, who lists Victoria Mahoney, Ava DuVernay, Gina Prince-Bythewood and Issa Rae as among the artists she admires. “Filmmaking allows me to have different moments and experiences. You can tell a story about literally everything and anything through film. There is such a spectrum of content to be covered.”

Thomas says one of her favorite things to do is to go to film festivals, such as the Urbanworld Film Festival, a multicultural film festival presented by BET Networks and HBO, and the Athena Film Festival held at Barnard College, which celebrates female filmmakers. Last summer, Thomas attended the Cannes Film Festival.

“That was an amazing experience,” said Thomas, who attended panels where practitioners talked about their films, and the process of financing and distribution. “It’s very hard to make a film. I don’t think anyone knows how hard it is unless you have done it.”

Thomas is native of Miami, where she lived one street over from Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. She spent two summers as a teacher at Miami’s Breakthrough Collaborative, teaching English to middle school students and offering a basketball elective. “It’s really hard to motivate kids to want to do homework over summer break, but it’s cool to be in a position to not only mentor and



One of Cai Thomas’ biggest fans, her mother LaChanze, was on hand to watch her receive the 2015 Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship. (Photo by Frank Curran)

nurture these children, but also to educate them. It's really powerful."

As a high school senior, Thomas was named a Jackie Robinson Foundation Scholar, one of only 60 in the country for her projected year of college graduation. Students are selected for this program based on strong leadership potential and dedication to community service.

In addition to film, Thomas' interests include broadcasting – she is a co-host of "The Molly Bean Show" on WZBC. She is involved in a number of campus organizations, such as the Jemez Pueblo Exchange Program, an immersion experience for BC students at a Native American community in New Mexico. She also served as a host for Mari Yepa, a high school student from the pueblo who came to BC in the fall.

"I've learned so much from this program. Native American identity is not monolithic. There are over 500 recognized tribes. It was really interesting to be on the reservation during their high holiday time. They have their buffalo dances and it's a very sacred ritual. So to be outsiders and get to witness that is a privilege and honor."

Thomas praises BC for its "commitment to social justice. And I like the religious aspect. Biblical Heritages is by far the most intensive class I've ever taken, but I think it improved my spirituality, which I'm appreciative of."

Thomas cited English Associate Professor of the Practice Allison Adair and Communication Assistant Professor of the Practice Celeste Wells as particularly supportive faculty members. "I had Allison for my freshman writing class. She is into poetry and hip-hop and became a mentor for me. Even though she teaches 150 students, Celeste makes you feel like you have a one-to-one student-teacher relationship. She wrote my recommendation letter for Cannes and has helped me a lot."

Thomas plans to continue to tell stories through film and hopes to submit a project to a film festival in the near future. Her film on Blake Bolden is scheduled to air on New England Sports Network as part of its new series showcasing college filmmakers, "NESN Next Producer," premiering April 6. To view Thomas' film and vote for it as a fan favorite, go to <http://go.nesn.com/1AMxW1I>.