So wrote business student Alina Johnson in nominating Michael Thomas for the 2006 RARE Award. She went on to say: “My journey into college after several attempts in the past was wrought with obstacles. Such is the way for many students; but Mr. Thomas, as he has for many others, helped ignite my interest into an appreciation for learning that has sustained me through-out my undergraduate career.”

Partners Plus was created to help academically-challenged students connect the dots between high school, two-year community college, and a four-year degree. Its uniqueness lies in the ways it helps students develop an academic vision, acclimate to college life, and position themselves for success in life.

The program was struggling when Michael Thomas arrived on the scene in 1994, but he quickly energized it through innovations like developmental workshops, leadership training, mentoring, tutoring, and scholarship assistance. Over ten years, the program has grown from serving 40 students a year to currently serving over 400 in 2005. In 2000, Partners Plus received the Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars Award for promoting and encouraging equal educational opportunities for minorities.

This extraordinary commitment and dedication comes as no surprise given the fact that in 1974, when Mike was only seventeen, a Detroit Free Press article said this about Mike; “Mike feels pretty strongly that something must be done about the large number of young people who come out of high school and haven’t been taught enough to get into college right away.”

Mike Thomas has created a culture of diversity and empowerment by demanding that students take charge of their lives and do their best to perform with excellence every day. He allows students to have input into every new element of the program and he immediately set out to kill the myth that being smart was bad for minorities. Students, for instance, developed their own orientation program, College 101. As part of it, Mike takes incoming students away for a weekend retreat to get them acclimated to college life. Each year at the retreat, he delivers the same compelling message to his incoming students: “At some time in your life you have to stop blaming other people and circumstances and take charge of your life. Only you can make a choice about what you want for yourself. Pick something, commit to it and become excellent at it. Remember that no single issue, comment, person, course, program, college or university should stop you from getting your degree. Keep telling yourself that you are too close to quit.”

Many have heard this inspiring message over the years, and for some it has changed their lives. At this year’s retreat, Partners Plus celebrated the accomplishments of its first Doctorate Degree holder, Dr. Nikita Plummer and its first Fulbright Scholar, Reneta Gray.

One of the many letters in support of his RARE Award said this about Mike Thomas as a role model:

“The qualities of a role model never change; commitment, creativity, high energy, charisma and enthusiasm. It is the delivery of these qualities that separate the ordinary from the exceptional, and Mike Thomas from others.”

Now, It’s

The RARE Foundation looks forward to reading your essay and learning about how your Everyday Hero:

- Distinguishes themself in their everyday work.
- Demonstrates values like dedication, courage, integrity, selflessness and compassion in their everyday life.
- Serves as a positive role model for you and for others.
Over the past 10 years, I have learned so much from program students. For that education and knowledge, I want to thank all of our program students. The valuable wisdom students have shared with me has been priceless. Having said that let me say this: I want to share some of that knowledge with all of you and ask you to read it, adopt it, and share it with others. It will help you become a more successful student like so many of our students have become.

- Attend all of your classes on the first day. No excuses. Be on time and in class.

- Read your college's catalog. If you don't know where to get a catalog from, check at any Help Desk on campus. Catalogs are free and contain information on institutional policies, services, and funds available to students.

- Read outside materials, not just your textbooks. For example, Business Week, Black Enterprise, Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, Detroit News/Free Press, Michigan Chronicle, etc... Some magazines or papers are very helpful.

- Invest time in your education and personal growth by attending educational events. MAKE THE TIME. Events are held with your best interest and growth in mind. A small investment of your time will yield a big return in your life.

- Remember, YOU CREATE IT ALL IN YOUR LIFE, through your choices. How can you create good things? By making wise choices!! Seek out advice if you need to, but make wise choices. Think before you jump into something. Think before you speak or act. Be mindful and respectful. A good rule to remember is, if you don't want something done or said to you, why would you do or say it to someone else?

- Seek help early in your courses if you become overwhelmed. Don't wait. At the first sign of confusion, talk with us and your instructor.

- Lastly, have some balance in your life. Attend some of our events, go to the movies, and get about an hour of quiet time each week. Take a walk around campus or some nice quiet place. College can be stressful but it can also be a wonderful enjoyable experience. Partners Plus can make college more enjoyable, so stop in and talk with us.

Partners Plus can help you build your dream!
"Knowledge is like electricity; it is of no use if it is not available to all".
- Floyd Washington

Sometimes we are blessed with the opportunity to collaborate with people with integrity and intelligence. I know that because of my relationship with Mr. Floyd Washington. Mr. Floyd Washington remains an example of what education, a caring personality, a spirit of inclusion, and good work ethic can achieve. I admired everything about him especially his capacity to embrace the mission, work, and the students of Partners Plus. He would often discuss with me what was needed for students, sharing my passion and commitment to see more students from our community get a college degree, have working knowledge, and share in the economic realities of America. We both understood that we alone could not change every young person’s life, but Mr. Washington truly felt that we should impact as many young people as we could. For that spirit, Partners Plus, its students, and I have been blessed.

I often told Mr. Washington that after he was our retreat dinner keynote speaker in 2002, Partners Plus realized a significant increase in student achievement and graduation. I credited that student achievement increase to his remarks at the dinner. He challenged all of us to be proud of our heritage, and asked students to stay focus and graduate from college. “If I can do it coming from a poor farm family in the bayous of Louisiana, you can do it”, he said. His words touched many students that evening and helped our students better understand that by “Visualizing their goals, they can Realize their dreams”.

Mr. Floyd Washington stated that “Partners Plus is a great program – one that any corporation or individual would be happy to be affiliated with. This is a great investment in one of our most important resources – our young people”.

I have always given students many reasons to obtain college degree(s) as did Mr. Washington. Just like Mr. Washington, today I would like to challenge every student in the program to finish his or her education, have and display a sense of fellowship, trust and integrity, and gain some knowledge to share with others. To those with an education who work for a company or educational institution, I would like to challenge you to eliminate barriers to individual’s success, work towards diversity, be more inclusive of all people, promote and reward them, and most importantly, help them get ahead in life. If all of you are willing to do that, you can join me in continuing the work and philosophy of Mr. Floyd Washington; not only for our program students, but in our community and country as well.

Mr. Floyd Washington
June 6, 1943 – April 11, 2005
In 1996, the Partners Plus program held its first dinner in my home. Today, we are celebrating 12 years of your achievements in education in a much larger place. I could not begin to imagine that our program would have grown this large and helped so many of you attain more than one degree. Your dedication and sacrifice to reach your educational goals must be commended.

However, in 2006 it is unsettling that the news regarding student educational attainment is still disturbing. I shall never forget an article in the Detroit News on March 19, 2006 by Nolan Finley. In this article, Mr. Finley presents new research from Rebecca M. Blank and James M. Sallee from the University of Michigan. Blank and Sallee presented their work in a paper titled “Where Do We Go From Here?” That paper stated in part that “only 51% of Michigan high school graduates go on to college or some other training, compared with 57% for the nation. Michigan is eighth in high school graduation rates, but 40th in college attendance”. Mr. Finley made two statements that I clearly agree with. His first comment was that people in Michigan still shrug off college as the path to success, despite solid evidence that college graduates make more money and are less likely to lose their jobs. His second comment was that people in Michigan are just plain stupid to dismiss going to college especially given the economic advantages of a college education.

Allow me to present another point regarding education in Michigan. The Detroit Free Press reported in March of 2005, that “only 24.4% of residents in Michigan over 25 years of age have a bachelor’s degree or higher”. This does place the State of Michigan below the national average of 27.7 percent. Both the national average and Michigan average are too low for my comfort. Therefore, I ask that you begin to recognize the need to wage a battle to end circumstances that lead to lack of opportunities in your life, such as a lack of education, lack of employable skills, lack of money for basic needs, and lack of a professional network to rely upon and most importantly, lack of meaningful sustainable employment. Stay with Partners Plus so we can help you wage a good fight to overcome most of those barriers.

Tonight, I want to share something with you that I hope you will never forget. I hope what I share with you will stick with you forever. I want you to remember that no single change, issue, comment, person, course, program, college, or university should stop you from getting your bachelor’s degree. You must fight the good fight, wage a strong battle, continue to move forward with the power and glory, dedication and sacrifice that will carry you across the stage that all college graduates must walk one day. Keep telling yourself that you are “Too Close To Quit”.

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From the Director’s Desk

Michael T. Thomas, Sr.
11th Annual Student Retreat 2007

Over the years I have worked to help students understand the importance of education, completing what they start (college), and to have the needed skills when any opportunity presents itself. This has not been easy; convincing student to change the way they think, live, and behave. I believe that last year was one of the toughest years for students, Partners Plus, and me. I am sure that the local job market and economic conditions played a big role in the struggles that many Partners Plus students faced. Also, Partners Plus had to walk with families as they buried their love ones. Sometimes, I can only listen to student’s challenges and other times I could assist by securing some resources to soften their burdens. Either way, it was tough for you to survive. I felt it and I knew it. However, I just keep asking you to think of the alternative if you don’t finish your educational journey and reach the end of the road (the stage to receive your degree).

I want to yield some of this page to one of our students that faced some major challenges last year, but she listened and trusted my message and decided to make it. I am so proud of her and our other graduates this year. Lastly, for me, I ask that you all remember to take care of your health, be aware of HIV/AIDS, and encourage family members and friends to get a regular medical check up. Please remember Shiemei Muhammad (PP Student) and Monique Shell – Bunch (one of my U of D Mentees).

Tanesha Stinson, Partners Plus Staff member
AB, Henry Ford Community College 2007 Graduate

Being a single-parent student is hard. Working, studying, cooking, cleaning and finding reliable daycare can become quite tedious. In my second year at Henry Ford, I struggled to maintain myself academically and I lacked the motivation to push myself harder. The idea of dropping out of college laced with troublesome issues at home made it difficult for me to focus. I found myself pretending as if I were on top of the world, clothed with an affirmation of my purpose, when inside I was at my lowest point. My grades dropped, along with my self esteem, and I became afraid that I was going to fail. On top of my personal struggles of being a single mother, two important women in my life died on the same weekend. I lost my grandmother on Saturday and my mother on Sunday. I was hurt, lonely, and depressed with no one there to understand why I felt the way that I did. Mr. Thomas, his family, a few of his colleagues and a host of Partners Plus students were there to help me through this rough time. Mr. Thomas explained to me how close I was to obtaining my degree and how much more important it was for me to get it now that my children only had me to look up to. He assured me that the only thing that could heal my pain was time and that he would do everything he could to help me along the way. I believed in his sincerity and made him a promise that I would finish college. I received my Associates Degree in Business this May and have a spot on Florida A & M University’s campus waiting for me in August. I owe Mr. Thomas and Partners Plus the recognition of my successes and my accomplishments that are to come. This program has been my avenue to continue my education forward to a Bachelors Degree. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to have such a strong-willed and charismatic figure in my life to show me that you have to search, strive and survive it all to reach your goal. Thank you Mr. Thomas!