

Leader Among Us: Creative thinking, new ideas earn two awards

Written by Chris Lee

A little unsure as to why he is being recognized, second-year social studies teacher Luke Thomas humbly accepts this year's Leader Among Us Emerald Award.

"We have a lot of great staff here," Thomas said. "It came really as kind of a shock."

Thomas said his wife, Bethany, wouldn't like him saying it, but he noted, "Not really deserving, because there are so many great teachers in this building."

The recognition Thomas will receive Friday night, April 20 isn't the first this year for the Holyoke social studies teacher. About a month and a half ago Thomas was busy reading over a packet of information for his History Day students during an awards ceremony when his name was called for National History Day Teacher of the Year for northeast Colorado.

"That whole thing was a shock as well," Thomas said.

The presentation came after eight groups of students brought home awards, which was more than any other school. All school sizes were represented at the contest and six of Holyoke's groups are moving on to the state competition May 5.

"It's a credit to our students and how hard they've worked," Thomas noted.



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There is no sitting and watching the high school track athletes. Luke Thomas, who enjoys nearly any physical activity, works out right along with Holyoke's track athletes. He serves as an assistant coach for the Dragon squad. Thomas is pictured in the middle with Chis Pell at left and Matt Golden at right.

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—Enterprise photo

Thomas' nominator for the Emerald Award, Stefan Betley, mentioned how Thomas worked with English teachers Heather Bieber and Carla Mayfield in a cross curricular effort to give students more time to prepare their History Day projects.

"It's something that I just think is important," Thomas said in regard to the collaboration effort with other teachers.

"A risk can be defined as trying something no one else wants to try," Betley said. "In his time in the district, Mr. Thomas has always wanted to collaborate and now he has found a way to work together with his colleagues and get students excited about doing academic research."

Thomas really touts the efforts of Bieber and Mayfield and appreciates their help to prepare the group.

"He wants to be out front showing others how it is done even if that means he will have to find a way to collaborate with every teacher in the district," Betley said. "I cannot think of anyone else in the district more deserving."

Another trait that is evident with the Leader Among Us is he isn't afraid to try new things.

Thomas was the driving force in getting students ready for History Day, which was held in Greeley March 3. When he began teaching in Holyoke, Thomas knew he wanted to get Holyoke students involved with History Day. But as a new teacher, he felt the first year wasn't the time to

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bring on such an in-depth project.

After settling in this year, he felt his students could handle the stress and load of the bigger project. They did, and they shined.

Students prepared multiple projects that required different medial skills and were given the choice to select the media in which their final projects were presented.

Thomas is looking ahead and hopes the project will benefit the students in the long run. He hopes it will help them get into college as well as earn scholarships.

Already having no free time, the self proclaimed “straight up history nerd” is in the middle of planning an exciting trip for some of his students.



Luke Thomas, at left, is pictured with his family, wife Bethany, son Damek, 1 and daughter Bria, 6. □ □

—Photo courtesy of Deb Uber

Thomas has been the backbone, with the help of fellow social studies teacher Nic Balog, of organizing a summer Washington, D.C. trip for students. His leadership and drive has given 18 Holyoke students the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C. this summer to see the sights

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and soak up a bit of history.

The group will board a plane June 4 and spend four jam-packed days in the nation's capital.

Having seen an article in the Holyoke Enterprise about the trip, United States Senator Michael Bennet contacted Thomas and has invited the group to stop by his Colorado Coffee Meeting while they are in town. This unique experience will be just one of the many stops the group has on the agenda.

Giving much credit to his wife, Thomas said he has spent numerous hours outside of the classroom preparing and planning for both History Day and the D.C. trip.

He is in the middle of planning parents meetings, keeping track of finances, keeping students informed and getting schedules together.

Looking into the future, Thomas hopes to take students to History Day each year and offer some type of educational tour every other year. He noted possible destinations could include Boston, Philadelphia and maybe even a Holocaust tour in Europe.

Should something else present itself, Thomas will most likely pounce on it. "Anything where students can work really hard," he said.

"I push the kids because I can see their potential," he stated. "I want them to be successful in life. I don't want to see a kid slip and fall through the cracks and no one notice."

Thomas noted he was one who slipped through the cracks. In his role as a teacher, he said he would feel successful if he helped one kid get turned around and send them down a positive path instead of a negative path.

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Thomas and his family moved to Holyoke in 2010 and they thoroughly enjoy the smaller feel. He grew up in the small mountain town of Woodland Park where he graduated high school in 1999.

After a year of college at Colorado State University, Thomas decided to try his hand in the dry cleaning business. He began working at the front counter and quickly climbed up to a district manager of a chain of stores in the Fort Collins area.



Leader Among Us Luke Thomas shares his talents and makes the teaching profession stronger.

—Enterprise photo

After a while, Thomas decided he didn't want to spend the rest of his life in that particular profession so he decided to hit the books and go back to school.

In 2009, Thomas graduated from Regis University with his bachelor of arts and social science degree.

Prior to moving to Holyoke, he held multiple substitute teaching positions.

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Thomas and wife Bethany have a 6-year-old daughter, Bria and a 1-year-old son Damek who was born in Holyoke.

Thomas enjoys spending time with his family. He also likes the outdoors and any physical activity. He helps coach high school track and junior high football for Holyoke.

All of this is piled on top of his time spent trying to earn his master's degree. He currently is working through Regis University to obtain his master's in history. He also has not ruled out the possibility of going further in school as well.

"I just felt in order to become a better teacher I just need to know more and more and more about my content area," Thomas said. "There are always things you can learn."

People won't see this teacher walking down the hall with his award proudly tucked under his arm. He credits a strong staff and student population for the kind gesture.

"I just try to give it my all and try to make learning exciting for these kids," this year's Leader Among Us said.

Leader Among Us **Luke Thomas**



Current position: JH/HS Social Studies

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Education: Woodland Park High School, Woodland Park, class of 1999; Regis University, class of 2009.

Job experience: I taught social studies in Colorado Springs before moving to Holyoke two years ago. Before I went into teaching I worked in the dry cleaning business for eight years. I started as a front counter worker and moved my way to dry cleaning professional, production manager and eventually district manager.

Family: Wife Bethany, Bria 6 and Damek 1.

Hobbies: Spending time with my family. I love the outdoors and any physical activity: running, biking, mountain biking, swimming, hiking, camping, reading, skiing, martial arts and playing cards.

Favorite Holyoke school memory: Having my 10th grade American History students give me multiple codes to break and clues to crack in order to collect their spy report information. I have literally run all over the school and had to create a cryptography team to help me decode all the information.

Favorite Holyoke memories: My favorite Holyoke memory will always be when my son Damek was born at Melissa Memorial Hospital, April 13, 2011.

Role models: Former Denver Bronco Rod Smith. For his humility and work ethic.

Professor John Carry. For his passion and enthusiasm.

My brother Seth. For his creativity and love for life.

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Leader Among Us:

This is open to any employee who provides excellent leadership in the building, with a team, on a special project or through a wealth of service to the district. This award acknowledges that in order to achieve lofty goals, leadership must come from all levels in an organization.

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