ALL THE RIGHT MOVES
Salome Thomas-EL with the Stoddart-Fleisher chess club.

The Best Philadelphian 2006

Disney wants to make a movie about ***Salome Thomas-EL****'s life. He could be hanging out on Sunset Boulevard with his new friend Will Smith. But he's not. He's at an obscure Philadelphia middle school with the kids—"because every child deserves to have somebody be crazy about him"*

By Sandy Hingston

Salome Thomas-EL knows what it's like to be saved. That's why he's standing in front of three dozen students in a stuffy classroom at Stoddart-Fleisher Middle School at 13th and Green one afternoon deep into the school year. Thomas-EL is the principal at Stoddart-Fleisher, and these kids are all on its WILL NOT GRADUATE list.

"How many of you are here because you haven't done your research projects?" asks Mr. EL, as the kids call him. Eleven of the students raise hands. "Does anybody have an excellent excuse for not handing in the project? What helicopter clipped you? What car hit you?"

"I can't get in to use the computer," a boy mutters sullenly.

"That's not an excellent excuse," Mr. EL tells him, arms folded tight across his crisp white shirt. "That's a *poor* excuse."

"Those other kids, they got the *easy* crap," another boy snipes. "My project was *complicated*."

"Who selected that project?" asks Mr. EL.

"Me and my partner."

"My partner and I."

"Yeah," the boy says dubiously.

Mr. EL squares his shoulders, looking from one student to another in the crowded room. "Nobody's legs got chopped off here," he says sternly. "Nobody's caring for an elderly grandmother. This project was due February 1st. Then came Valentine's Day. St. Patrick's Day. Easter." He shakes his head. "Memorial Day is the last holiday. I'll give you until Memorial Day to finish. But I don't want to hear you say the trolley got a flat."

"Trolley can't *get* a flat," a boy retorts.

"That's why I don't want to hear it."

"That's why I wouldn't say it."

Everybody laughs. It's a good start toward what Salome Thomas-EL is angling for with these kids. He wants them to know that somebody is looking out for them, rooting for them, not about to let them slip through the cracks. He wants every child to feel worthwhile. He wants it so much that he's risked his marriage and his career—and passed up a much easier life—in pursuit of that goal.

Mr. EL turns to the team of three teachers present—Phyllis Kaiser, Sara Demoiny and Bob Bernstein—and tells them, "I want you to ask somebody to stand up whose behavior has improved."

"Simone has improved," offers Demoiny.

"Stand up, Simone!" Mr. EL booms, and she does, looking pleased but shy.

"Laquan and Bastille have improved," says Bernstein. "Bastille is trying hard."

Mr. EL's head whips toward Bastille. "You're not going to thank him for that compliment?"

"Thank you," Bastille mumbles, then grins.

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On it goes, the teachers singling students out, the students standing, being recognized, blushing at the compliments, reveling in the attention being paid them. But they're not out of the woods. There's a class trip at stake. "Why should I take students that we had to beg for an assignment that was due in February in *May?*" asks Mr. EL. "Raise your hand if you think you deserve to go on that trip." All the hands fly up. "Khalil. Why do you think you deserve to go?"

"I done my years here," Khalil says lazily.

Mr. EL laughs. "You done your time? If you can't behave in my house, I don't take you *out* of my house. Ask your parents to take you, not me."

"Am I a question mark?" asks a boy in the back.

"Everybody in this room," says Mr. EL, "is a question mark."

Stoddart-Fleisher Middle School is full of question marks. The building is old, worn but handsome, with arched windows and plaster moldings and rich-hued tile floors so striking that parts of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* were filmed here. The faded grandeur only accentuates the echoing halls—170 kids in a space built for 600. They face the same challenges that most students in the Philly public-school system do. Ninety percent of the kids here are from low-income or poverty-level households. Over 70 percent come from single-parent homes. Sixty-nine percent of S-F students score at basic—defined by the state as "marginal academic performance"—or lower in math in the PSSAs; 76 percent do so in reading. Districtwide, at least one-third of all students drop out. And there were 5,272 "violent-crime incidents" in the schools this past year.

Salome Thomas-EL, 41, knows all about question marks. He started out as one—an unexpected twin, the seventh of eight children of Doris Thomas, a native of South Carolina who'd left home for New York and then Philly. His family lived in the Diamond Street projects. His father came around sometimes, but he never stayed long.

Doris worked at Temple Hospital. She'd grown up Presbyterian, but in the '70s, when everyone was talking about black power, she turned to Islam, and tacked the syllable "EL"—both letters capitalized—onto her absent, abusive husband's surname. (She later returned the family to Christianity.) "It means 'of God,'" Salome Thomas-EL says. "'Thomas' was the legacy of slavery. We had been named for the family that owned us. My mother made the name our own."

Salome always stood out for his brains. In 1974, when he was in fourth grade, his teacher encouraged him to switch to the Julia R. Masterman School, for gifted students. His friends scoffed. But the way he tells the story in his 2003 memoir *I Choose to Stay*—the one with the foreword by Arnold Schwarzenegger—his teacher, Mrs. Porter, wouldn't take no for an answer. "Now you listen to me, Mr. Thomas-EL," she said. "You *are* going to Masterman."

Doris said the same thing. "My mother was a woman of many sacrifices," says Mr. EL. "She never had a car. I never knew her to buy a new outfit for herself. But she used to take us to lectures at Temple. And we had loads and loads of books—used books in used bookcases. She'd say, 'I'm not hearing about you going to college, just what college are you going to attend.'"

With the help of a village full of mentors—each of whom Thomas-EL thanks in his memoir, and in a second book that came out in May, *The Immortality of Influence*—he did make it to college: to East Stroudsburg, way out in rural Pennsylvania. His first year, somebody painted a swastika on his dorm-room door. His lock was waxed. A sign appeared on the wall: GO HOME NIGGER.

He called his mom. "I'm coming home," he said.

"Don't give in," Doris told him. "Don't hate because others do."

He stuck it out. He confronted his tormentors. The harassment stopped. He moved off campus after freshman year, graduated, and settled on teaching as a career. He'd learned what he longed to pass on: "Every child deserves to have somebody be crazy about him."

Salome Thomas-EL sees dead people. Specifically, he sees dead boys—20 of them who've been killed since he started teaching full-time 17 years ago. Students he knew, who walked the halls he walked. "That's too many funerals to go to," he says softly. He knows what becomes of inner-city kids who don't have a Mrs. Porter, or a mom like his. And he knows what those kids need. They have to believe in themselves.

Thomas-EL has a gift for helping kids do that, and early in his career, he was bursting with ideas. He started a school breakfast plan, a Saturday academy, a Second Chance Program for kids who were struggling academically. And because he was unafraid and energetic and stubborn, good things happened. "I admire him so much," says School Reform Commission chairman James Nevels. "He has single-handedly advanced the cause of urban children in a really substantial way."

Take one of his first assignments, at Vaux Middle School (it's pronounced "Vox"), at 24th and Master in North Philly. In searching for a way to motivate the *(continued on page 170)*

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students, he learned about the then-defunct Vaux chess club, which had an illustrious history: seven consecutive national school titles, from 1976 to 1982. Almost a decade had passed since those glory days. Thomas-EL wasn't even much of a chess player. But he liked the notion of a game that celebrated smarts instead of athletic ability.

And this is where Salome Thomas-EL's story gets a little bit Disney. He told the kids who came out for the Vaux chess club that if they worked hard and believed in themselves, they could do anything they dreamed of. He told them with *authority*, with *conviction*—because he knew it was true! It had happened to him!

"Salome brings an eternal optimism to his work," says Philadelphia schools superintendent Paul Vallas. "Too often in education, you have people who are pessimists. If you don't feel optimistic about students, if you don't believe they can reach high standards, they get the message. Salome looks at the possibilities. He doesn't look for excuses. That's a quality that all great educators possess."

"I needed to stay and be able to mentor and watch the kids grow," Thomas-EL wrote. "To be there. Just to be something constant in their lives."

Earl Jenkins remembers the first time he met Mr. EL—right after he got cut from the Vaux basketball team for being too short. "My cousin Demetrius said, 'Come out for the chess team!' I was like, 'Chess?'" But Earl went down to the chess room with Demetrius, and that's where he saw Mr. EL. "He was making jokes," Jenkins recalls. "It was like he was my age, the way he was talking." Jenkins signed on, because Mr. EL promised the members trips. That meant a lot to a kid who'd never been outside the 'hood. "We went to different *states*," Jenkins recalls. "We stayed in hotels that had *swimming pools*. We ate out. We ate out *every meal*." The new chess team started taking the game more seriously. And it started winning. Two years after the program was revived, *boom,* Vaux owned a national chess championship again.

The unlikely bottom-to-top tale was just like a Disney movie—which is why Disney bought the rights to Mr. EL's book. Suddenly he was hanging with Arnold Schwarzenegger and taking meetings with Will Smith, who wanted to play him in the film. He was

making motivational speeches all over the country. On *The O'Reilly Factor*, discussing whether gangsta rap was harming inner-city students, he faced off against rapper Cam'ron, who held himself up as a positive role model, an entrepreneur and CEO. "You need to have more parent-teacher conferences if you have problems with your students," Cam'ron said archly.

Mr. EL came right back at him: "The same parents that you're now denigrating, you make millions of dollars off these people. … Many of these children have parents who are incarcerated, parents who are drug-addicted. They don't have the parental involvement they need. They look up to a lot of you guys. … They don't have a lot of contact with positive men. And tonight, you're making a mockery of their situation."

Suddenly, Salome Thomas-EL was on the national stage. By the time Disney bought his story, he was getting job offers from all over—from other urban school districts, like Chester, which offered to top any salary bid by

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$10,000, and from cushier suburban schools, like Cheltenham, which dangled a paycheck of $100,000-plus at him. He declined them all to remain in North Philly. "I needed to stay and be able to mentor and watch the kids grow," he wrote in *I Choose to Stay*. "To be there. Just to be something constant in their lives."

The money wasn't all that hard to turn down. He'd already overcome a tougher hurdle with his wife, Shawnna.

They met cute—at a Vaux graduation dinner-dance; one of her young cousins was an eighth-grader. Salome stared at Shawnna. She stared at him. They danced. They talked. She told her grandma, "I'm going to marry that man."

She did. And she knew it wouldn't be easy. But it was worse than she had imagined. One winter, sick and tired of Salome putting in so much time with the kids, she gave him an ultimatum: Spend Valentine's Day with me, or else. He'd scheduled the chess team for a tournament in Virginia that would end on Sunday and leave him free for Valentine's Day on Monday. But a freak Southern snowstorm canceled it. There was another tournament that same

weekend, in Parsippany, New Jersey—but it went through Monday. "Just ask her," the kids urged him, itching to compete.

"You don't understand," he told them.

"*She* will," they, raised on Disney movies, said. "Ask her." So Salome did, hoping she'd say the right thing, the Disney-movie thing: "You go with those children, darling, because they need you!"

She didn't. Instead she said, "I'll let *you* make that decision."

Mr. EL went. Earl Jenkins's cousin, Demetrius Carroll, scored the biggest upset in tournament history. His family had been evicted from its home a few days before; the teachers at Vaux had chipped in to buy him clothes so he could make the trip. The kids were treated to a free meal at the Parsippany Hilton's restaurant, and ordered prime rib and lobster—things they'd only read about in books. Then Mr. EL went home to Shawnna.

"I was disappointed," she says. "This was something I didn't sign on for. We were having a lot of trouble, and that weekend was the straw that broke the camel's back." She laughs. "I told him that in his book, he portrayed me much nicer than how I felt at the time."

She stuck it out. They had a daughter, Macawi, and then another, Nashetah. Nashetah arrived three months premature, and weighed less than two pounds. She spent months in the hospital. "The doctor was honest," says Mr. EL. "He couldn't promise she'd be completely healthy." The nurses told him the same things he was always telling his students: "You can't lose faith. You have to think positive." A total role reversal.

Mr. EL had faith. He thought positive.

Nashetah's two now, and doing just fine.

Willow Briggs is the dead boy Mr. EL sees most. Willow came up with Earl and Demetrius at Vaux, played on the chess team, went to the tournaments, saw the swimming pools and hotels and restaurants, the whole other world that chess opened up. In seventh grade, he was ranked 25th in the *nation* in his division. He had so much potential. But Vaux is only a middle school. And Willow moved on to a high school that didn't have a chess team. He lost his sense of direction. Got in with the wrong crowd. He was shot to death on the corner of 17th and Jefferson. He was 16 years old.

Mr. EL took it hard. He blamed himself. He asked: *Where did I fail him? What could I have done differently?* Willow's death has made him try harder. "If I take one day off, one minute off, one *second*," he says, "we could lose another life."

Willow's death had one more lasting effect.

"I used to think I could tell who would make it," Mr. EL says ruefully. He doesn't anymore.

In May, Earl Jenkins and Demetrius Carroll and Nathan Durant, all members of that first Vaux chess team with Willow, graduated, together, from Kutztown University. Mr. EL went to the ceremony. He'd helped pay their bills, took Carroll into his home for a summer, bought them clothes, helped Durant support a child, even bought a PlayStation for the three when they roomed together freshman year.

"Kids who don't have parents, don't have fathers," says Earl Jenkins, "they try to find a family environment on the corner. They see people with nice cars and say, 'How'd they get that?' Then they'll do the exact same thing. But it's different if you have a mentor, someone you can admire and look up to who's tapping you on the back, saying '*This* is what you've got to do.'" Mr. EL has hundreds of kids he's tapped on the back—college grads, MBAs, Ph.D.'s, teachers, lawyers, social workers, ministers. Mothers. Fathers. All knowing now what he learned: *Every child deserves to have somebody be crazy about him*. The legacy, passed on.

Mr. EL is sitting in a too-small chair at a too-small table in the library at Stoddart-Fleisher, pondering his next move. He's only been at S-F since January. Though he'd like to have a permanent school of his own, he's currently an administrator-at-large, filling in where needed. The one sure thing he knows about September is that he won't be back here. Stoddart-Fleisher is closing, after 81 years. The neighborhood is changing. The school district's Stevens Administration Building, just across the street, has been sold, and will be turned into ritzy condominiums. The Stoddart-Fleisher kids will scatter, and so will the staff.

Wherever Mr. EL winds up next year, it will be in Philadelphia's public school system. And he knows what he'll be doing—starting all over again. Getting a chess club going. Recruiting a teacher to run an after-school girls' club. Dubbing the detention room "Yale," like the one at S-F, so kids in trouble can say, "I'm going to Yale." Until then, he'll be right here, walking the hallways, collaring a girl in a t-shirt and demanding, "Where's your uniform?" Hanging on the corner at dismissal, looking out for the kids, making sure they're safe. And every Tuesday and Thursday, after school, he'll be in the library, playing chess.

Just now, his opponent is Chaquille Smith, a seventh-grader whose rook is threatening one of Mr. EL's pawns.

"You don't know what you're doing there," Mr. EL scoffs.

Chaquille grins. He's 13, a round mound

of a boy with restless arms and legs, and there's absolutely no reason he *has* to be here. He could be running the streets. He could be home, lying on the sofa watching TV, or playing Nintendo. Instead, he's facing off against Mr. EL.

"You *hongry*," Mr. EL says. "You want that pawn *bad*." He scoots it out of harm's way.

Chaquille laughs, and so do the kids at the chessboard beside this one, a brother and sister: Christopher and Lamisha Smith, no relation to Chaquille except that they, too, are here in the library after school hours, with Sharaun Moore and Christopher Murray and Leymi Colon and Brooklyn Anderson and Steven Ortiz and Malik Flaks. Playing chess.

Chaquille moves his queen.

English teacher Bob Bernstein, craning from yet another chessboard, winces. "Chaq, what are you *doing?*"

"Big Momma coming up," Chaq retorts.

"I knew he was going to do that," Lamisha says. She and her brother are deep into their own game, each with only a few pieces left, but they've paused to take in this battle royal, the principal against the seventh-grader.

Mr. EL captures Chaquille's queen, then looks at him across the table. "You got a plan?" he demands. "If you aren't taking it seriously, there's no use playing." He asks it again: "Have you got a *plan?*"

"I got a plan," Chaq says, and moves his rook, then does a little Harlem shake in his chair, head bobbing, shoulders dipping.

"Ooh, coming like that? Coming like that?" says Mr. EL. His voice is soft and low. "He's starting to put it *down*. He's getting quite *tricky* with his little *mickey*. He's making some *pure* moves." The words and cadence are familiar by now: a steady male voice that isn't raised in anger, isn't spouting obscenities, isn't demanding or deriding or denigrating. That's just *there*. Woody Allen said 80 percent of success is showing up. By that standard, Salome Thomas-EL may be the most successful man Philadelphia has ever known.

"You got to *move* it, *move* it," he sings under his breath, making Chaquille giggle. Then Mr. EL glances at the chessboard beside his, where Lamisha is playing Christopher. "You're in too close," he tells Lamisha. "You're crowding his king." She nods, unoffended. No—flattered. This man in his pristine white shirt and blue tie, this man with his books and his Hollywood friends and his Disney movie, thinks she is important enough that he is here with her now, when he doesn't have to be.

Believing in her. Taking her seriously. Choosing to stay.

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