

# An Officer and A Gentlewoman

## A former Army captain set her sights on a career as a fashion photographer, and she's now a successful entrepreneur in Washington, D.C.

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From an ordnance officer in the Army to becoming a commercial model, pageant queen, entrepreneur and iconoclastic fashion guru, the evolution of Raquel Riley Thomas is endless.

The former Army captain parlayed a set of skills earned throughout a nine-year tenure in the military into management of a multi-purpose production company dubbed An Officer and Gentlewoman, LLC.

The origins of her company, which currently administers beauty pageants, fashion advice and TV castings, dates back to 1990, when Thomas followed the footsteps of her mother and grandmother by enlisting in the Army.

“Running a successful company with many subsidiaries takes a special degree of commitment, patience, loyalty and kindness,” Thomas said. “I learned a lot of those disciplines in the military.”

Thomas, a 1998 graduate of Hampton University in Virginia, served as a photojournalist during her first five years in the Army, a seed that later sprouted into a successful photography career following an honorable discharge in 2002.

“I enlisted as a photojournalist first, and then I went into ROTC and became an officer,” Thomas said. “With that already in my background, I started my own photography business after the military and began shooting swimsuit editorials, celebrity headshots and models for promo books.”

She then struck uncharted territory, becoming the first African-American woman to photograph Jet magazine centerfolds for nine years — another avenue paving the way for a world-class modeling career.

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Thomas, a slim, 5-foot-9-inch woman with features carved from a centerfold, walked into the Elite Modeling Agency studios in Atlanta hoping to get on a photographer's referral list, but left with a modeling deal instead.

"When I sat down to show one of their bookers my photos, she said, 'You have beautiful photography, however, you are absolutely gorgeous,'" Thomas recalled. "I was completely thrown by her statement, but at the end of the day I walked out as a model."

Since that encounter at Elite Modeling, Thomas' likeness has graced international billboards for commercial juggernauts that include Coca-Cola and Delta Air Lines.

The shared success in photography and modeling geared Thomas for another segue — beauty pageants.

Thomas' competitive nature coupled with her daughter Maria's questions about perceived beauty propelled her to the top of the industry in just two years.

"My daughter had asked me why princesses in her favorite movies and shows didn't look like her," Thomas said. "I gave her a B.S. answer at first, but it stuck in the back of my heart."

A few months later, Thomas snatched her opportunity at a proper answer while watching a national beauty pageant show alongside her daughter.

"I told myself at that moment that if there weren't any princesses like her, then I would be one," Thomas said. "I did my research and signed up for the Mrs. Maryland America, a pageant for married women."

Thomas won Mrs. Maryland 2010, moving her up for contention in the Mrs. America national pageant in 2011, where she earned the honor of being the first African-American to finish as 1st Runner-Up.

"It had been like 40-plus years, and I had been the first African-American woman to win runner-up," Thomas said. "I was very proud of being able to break some barriers there."

Thomas' accomplishment rippled, and in 2014, the Mrs. America pageant saw its first African-American winner, a testament to the influence that had sparked the creation of An Officer and Gentlewoman in 2011. The former Army officer learned later just how significant that accomplishment had been.

"It was an interesting thing," Thomas added. "I recently had lunch with her (Austen Williams), and she said to me 'Raquel, what you don't understand is that you cracked the ceiling for me to get through.' I just broke down because that just meant a lot."

Thomas stepped off the platform and went behind the scenes, using An Officer and Gentlewoman as a platform to run her own pageants and help more young women follow their dreams of being beauty queens.

With the rapid growth of her production company since 2011, Thomas, too, continued evolving and recently added to her entrepreneurial spirit by acquiring a certificate of completion from Harvard Business School's online program.

She currently resides near her headquarters in Washington, D.C., where a separate career as a philanthropist and supporter of veterans remains unabated. Thomas donates portions of the pageant proceeds yearly to military-focused charities such as Luke's Wings and VETSports.

The accrued success in civilian life and philanthropic nature has earned her distinction as "Leader of the Future" by Ebony magazine. It also warranted recognition from the Library of Congress under the Veterans History Project in 2015.

"That was one of the most humbling moments of my life," she said. "When you leave the military, you think people forget about you. So being rewarded for your time there is very special."

***This article is part of a series of VFW feature articles to be published throughout February 2020, highlighting African-American veterans who have made outstanding contributions to our military and society.***

*This article is featured in the February 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.*