

# 'We had a good life': Brothers reflect on childhood spent at Lynchburg's Presbyterian Home

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Cliff Thomas looks over and smiles at his brother, Jimmy Thomas, during their weekly meet-up at Third Wave Coffee on March 29.

Photo by Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

**E**very Tuesday, Third Wave Coffee in Forest gets a little bit rowdier in the best of ways.

Three brothers who have a special bond reserve a long wooden table in the middle of the coffee shop to laugh, share stories and catch up.

The Thomas Brothers — Jimmy, 83; Glen, 81; and Cliff, 79 — have been meeting Tuesday mornings at this very spot for the past six years.

“We joke a lot, we have fun with it,” Cliff said one recent Tuesday morning. “We have a lot of stories.”

That’s an understatement.

After their parents, Ruby and Harvey, divorced, the Thomas brothers and their three other siblings went to live with their grandparents in Laurel Fork in the Southwest region of the state.

“Grandma and Grandpa had a little farm and could hardly afford to eat themselves, and our parents dropped six kids off with them,” Glen said. “We didn’t know what was going on. We didn’t know how poor we were.”

A local Presbyterian pastor, Bob Childress, saw how the children weren't getting enough to eat and had very few clothes, so he took them to live with him for a while until he could make other arrangements.

In 1946, the Presbyterian Home — now HumanKind, a nonprofit offering counseling, early childhood development and other services at 1903 HumanKind Way — was an orphanage. Childress was told he could bring the four eldest children.

The two youngest, 2-year-old Judy and 1-year-old Danny, were too young. They were soon adopted by a family in Wichita, Kansas, and wouldn't see their parents or four older siblings until 1981.

"All the time, all the time, we wondered where they were," Glen said about his two youngest siblings. "We had no idea where they went. Nobody knew where they went."

On the day Childress dropped the children off at the Home, Barbara was 11, Jimmy was 8, Glen was 6 and Cliff was 4 years old.

The boys didn't see too much of Barbara while living at the Home since the girls lived on the other side of campus, Cliff said. But she would have had a job too, most likely working in the kitchen preparing meals, he said.

They would only see each other at meals or chapel.

"She would always keep an eye on us, but we wouldn't interact with her a whole lot," he said.

Cliff described the difference between their lives before and after going to the Home: "We were used to living in the mountains with an outhouse, no running water, and no central heat. When we came to the Home, we were given three square meals a day and indoor plumbing, shoes and school. When we went to the Home, we hit the jackpot."

At the time though, an 8-year-old Jimmy didn't agree and said, "I ain't going to no orphanage."

"I got back into Mr. Childress' station wagon and hid under a pile of clothes," Jimmy recalled.

"These two were too young to know they were even being dropped off," he said, referring to Glen and Cliff.

The three always remained close, but living with 60 other boys gave the term "brotherhood" a whole new meaning, Glen said.

"In the background we made sure that if we can help, we would help each other, but you tend to migrate to the children who have the same interests and are the same age," he said. "So were we close? I'd say yes, close, but we weren't chummy, chummy close."

The boys hadn't had any schooling until then, so Jimmy started in the first grade with Glen even though they were two years apart in age. The two stayed in school together, graduated in the same year at Boonsboro High School and even attended Hampden-Sydney College together briefly.

Jimmy said they loved sports a whole lot more than school and they became members of the now-famous Shoeless Wonders — the Home's football team that played without shoes and almost always won.

“Somewhere along the line, one of the guys pulled off his shoes to get more speed. And it really worked out well for him, and from then on, they never put shoes on again,” Glen said.

Every night after supper, the boys would play ball, Jimmy said.

“We choose up our teams at the dinner table,” Cliff said. “Two guys would choose and you’d leave the dinner table ready to play ball.”

There was an assortment of sports, Glen said, and everyone who grew up at the Home was an athlete. They would kick, throw and hit any ball they could with any object they could find, including a tennis ball with a broomstick.

“It’s unbelievable; we would play football from sunup to sundown if we didn’t have to work,” he said.

Jimmy said each child who lived at the Home walked away with a strong work ethic and everyone had a job, no matter how young.

“There was a working dairy farm, so some of us would work in the barn milking the cows and some of us would work in the garden,” Cliff said.

The Home had everything a farmer would, so there were vegetables, horses, cows, chickens and hogs.

“We grew everything we ate and we ate everything we grew,” Glen said. “Every year or maybe two years, you’d get assigned to a different job so you’d get a pretty good feel for everything going on in the farm.”

Even now though, Jimmy and Glen consider Cliff the lucky one, as he was a house boy and learned how to run a vacuum cleaner while the others were milking cows.

“During those years you would consider yourself lucky if you got certain jobs, and we consider Cliff extremely lucky because he never had to work,” Glen laughed.

All of the children received a heavy background in religion and attended what’s now Rivermont Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

The Thomases had prayer service every night, chapel every week and church on Sundays. They also sang in the boys’ choir.

The choir was formed by former Superintendent of the Pres Home Bernard Bain in the 1950s as an attempt to raise money for the Home.

The choir, made up of eight boys, traveled to various churches on Sundays, singing to the congregation after Bain preached and told the story of the Pres Home.

It worked too. Families would sign on to become sponsors of Pres Home children and often sent them lots of gifts for Christmas.

“Beautiful presents from floor to ceiling, Christmas tree, Christmas songs and everything,” Glen recounts. “Christmas was a very good time. It took the mail carriers 20 minutes to unload the truck of gifts.”

Cliff jokes there wasn’t much spoiling going on at the Home — except for Glen.

“And see, this is how I grew up,” Glen laughed. “They picked on me the whole time!”

“He’d get 20 gifts and I’d get one,” Jimmy joked.

All three brothers went to college and eventually graduated but after one semester at Hampden-Sydney, both Glen and Jimmy decided to join the Army.

Glen didn't know he was even heading to college after graduation. He said someone must have applied for him, even though he had wanted to attend Virginia Military Institute but received a \$300 scholarship to play basketball at Hampden-Sydney.

"Can you imagine an orphan going in with all those rich guys?" Glen said. "We didn't have two nickels to rub together, but I got vice president of the freshman class because of my popularity. I was on a high back then."

One semester in, the dean called Glen to inform him he no longer was a student at the college and advised him to grow up, Glen said.

"Well, I went back and told Jimmy, I said, 'Hey, I'm out of here. I don't know where I'm going but I'm out of here,'" he said.

"And I said, 'I am too,'" Jimmy replied.

"I graduated in spite of this," Cliff joked.

Tracy Richardson was a resident of The Presbyterian Home from the mid-1970s until 1982 and is now the alumni president for the Home.

Though she knows Cliff Thomas more than she knows the other brothers, saying he has always been an integral part of the Home, she said all of the brothers have had great support throughout the years.

"Being able to go to college, man, that's a huge thing," she said. "It's just amazing to me how we always talk about the Home and how it helped us become who we are today because there was always somebody there that was there to help you. It wasn't just one person either, we had a huge family to take care of us."

More importantly, the children helped each other.

"We were there for each other so you never were alone," she said.

In 1981, the six siblings, plus their parents, Harvey and Ruby — who also hadn't seen each other in 35 years — reunited at Cliff's home.

The brothers were happy to reconnect with their long-lost brother and sister, Judy and Danny, but agreed the gathering was weird.

"For me, it didn't feel like they were my brother and sister," Jimmy said. "There were no ties at all."

The brothers stayed in touch with them off and on, and Judy and Danny even came back to visit for Jimmy's 60th birthday, but that was the last time they all saw each other.

Their sister, Barbara, who lived in Sanford, North Carolina, died in March. Danny died years ago. Judy lives in Kansas but the brothers have lost touch with her.

Their father stayed in touch with his four children at the Home after they were dropped off and eventually moved to North Carolina and remarried.

"He would make contact with us as much as he could when we were there," Glen said. "We have all the respect in the world for him."

After Harvey Thomas' wife died, the brothers moved him up to Lynchburg, where he stayed until his death.

The situation with their mother was more complex.

Glen said Ruby moved all over the place and after she reconnected with her daughter, Barbara, in the 1950s, Ruby remained on Barbara's "coattails" until she died in the 1980s.

After graduating high school, Cliff went to Florida to visit Ruby for Christmas and remained in touch with her but said she was just another person in his life.

"She was my mother, but I didn't really know her," he said.

Before the three started meeting at Third Wave, despite all living in Bedford County, the Thomas brothers would only see each other every two months.

"It just makes us get together," Cliff said.

The Thomas brothers said they feel blessed when they look back on their lives.

"What we did get from the Home are values," Glen said. "None of us drink. Only one of us smokes and that's me with cigars. Anybody who has left the Home didn't have to go on welfare or ask for assistance. Most of them were pretty successful. And most of them that are our age are now retired. And they're not hurting. They're in good shape in retirement."

Simply said: They don't have any regrets, Cliff said.

"We had a good life at the Pres Home."