



Dave Thomas

Founder, Wendy's International, Inc.
1932 - 2002

“Only in America”

Dave Thomas was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey on July 2, 1932. Rex and Auleva Thomas adopted him at six weeks old. When Dave was five, Auleva died and his early years were spent moving from state to state while his adoptive father sought work.

Dave's fondest memories of his childhood included summers spent with his Grandma Minnie Sinclair in Michigan. She taught him about doing the right things, treating people well and important lessons about quality and service – all things he later used in his business life.

Dave got his first job at age 12 as a counterman at a Knoxville restaurant, and fell in love with the restaurant business. When he was 15, he found work at the Hobby House Restaurant in Ft. Wayne. It was then that he made what he considered his greatest mistake: he dropped out of school to work full-time. His father and stepfamily were preparing to move again and Dave decided to stay in Ft. Wayne, move into the YMCA and work full-time. This decision to drop out haunted him until he went back to school 45 years later and received his GED from Coconut Creek High School in Ft. Lauderdale. He said this was one of his greatest accomplishments, as was being named “Most Likely to Succeed” by the graduating class of 1993.

Through his work at the Hobby House, Dave met Colonel Sanders, founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken (now KFC) and the man who became one of the greatest influences in his life. In 1962, Dave had a chance to turn around four failing KFC restaurants in Columbus, Ohio owned by his Hobby House boss, Phil Clauss. Four years later, by using his experience and determination, he turned the stores around, sold the restaurants back to KFC and received a percentage of the sale – a millionaire at age 35.

Dave often said he was lucky to have been born in America. “Only in America,” he said, “would a guy like me, from humble beginnings and without a high school diploma become successful. America gave me a chance to live the life I want and work to make my dreams come true. We should never take our freedoms for granted, and we should seize every opportunity presented to us.”

His “rags-to-riches” success story earned him the Horatio Alger Award. It was presented to him in 1979 by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, a man he greatly admired.

“Innovative Twist on an Old-Fashioned Idea”

When he was a child, Dave dreamed of opening a hamburger restaurant. On November 15, 1969 Dave made his dream come true when he opened the first Wendy’s Old Fashioned Hamburgers restaurant in Columbus, Ohio. Named for one of his daughters, Wendy’s was everything Dave dreamed of: an old fashioned, homey place where families could be together and enjoy great tasting, made-to-order hamburgers.

Dave’s restaurant experience and vision enabled him to devise a method to prepare fresh, made-to-order hamburgers at a time when other quick-service restaurant chains were mass producing their food. “We don’t make a sandwich until it’s sold, so every Wendy’s sandwich is served hot-off-the-grill with the customer’s choice of toppings. They aren’t pre-made and put under a heat lamp,” Dave said. His innovative system allows Wendy’s to prepare individually made sandwiches while serving millions of customers each day.

Dave revolutionized the industry in other ways as well. Wendy’s became known for fresh (not frozen) ground beef hamburgers that are square rather than round. Dave explained, “At Wendy’s, we don’t cut corners!” All hamburger patties that were cooked but not sold became chili meat. At a time when American fast food restaurants featured plain plastic chairs and linoleum floors, Dave created an old-fashioned atmosphere by carpeting the dining rooms and furnishing them with Bentwood chairs, Tiffany-style lamps and newsprint table tops. Dave also created the modern-day Pick-Up Window, revolutionizing the quick service restaurant industry.

Under Dave’s leadership, Wendy’s was the first in the quick service restaurant industry to introduce the salad bar and baked potatoes nationwide.

The restaurant industry and the business community have applauded Dave’s innovation and success with Wendy’s. Dave received every major industry award and was honored as a pioneer in the restaurant business. Though business experts would point to different elements of Wendy’s operations as the reason for its success, to Dave it all came down to one thing: the customers. “If we take care of our customers every day and exceed their expectations, we’ll earn their loyalty,” he said. “It all comes back to the basics: serve customers the best tasting food at a good value in a clean, comfortable restaurant and they’ll keep coming back.”

“America’s Favorite Hamburger Cook”

While his success elevated his status in the business world as a pioneer, he never lost sight of his roots. “I’m just a hamburger cook,” Dave said on many occasions. He was most at home when talking with Wendy’s restaurant managers and operators because he understood them and what they face everyday. And to those managers and operators, Dave wasn’t just the founder of the company, he was a role model and an example of how hard work, dedication and commitment can lead to success.

He shared his experiences and knowledge he gained in his autobiography, *Dave's Way*, published in 1991. Dave saw it as a way to give back, and provide insight into how he turned his dreams into reality. He later published a book on success called *Well Done!*, and the business book *Franchising for Dummies*.

His success enabled him to travel around the world. But his favorite gourmet meal never changed: a Wendy's Single with cheese, mustard, pickle and onion, fries, bowl of chili, a Frosty and a diet Coke.

Dave was probably best known as the "guy on Wendy's TV commercials." In early 1989, Dave agreed to appear in a few Wendy's commercials. During his nearly 13-year run (and 800+ commercials) as Wendy's spokesman, Americans came to love him for his down-to-earth, homey style. This campaign made Dave one of the nation's most recognizable spokesmen. The Guinness World Records™ recognized the Dave Thomas Campaign as the "Longest Running Television Advertising Campaign Starring a Company Founder."

Throughout the campaign, Dave appeared with many famous celebrities, including NHL star Mike Richter, Olympic Gold Medalist Kristi Yamaguchi, and soap opera star Susan Lucci. Because of his honesty and old-fashioned values, Dave emerged from Wendy's advertising campaign as an American folk hero.

"Adopting the Cause"

Dave believed that everyone has a responsibility to give something back to the community. The cause closest to his heart was adoption. Adopted as an infant, Dave felt a strong personal tie to those children who were waiting to be adopted. He said he was lucky to have been adopted and wanted every waiting child to have a permanent home and loving family.

In 1990, President Bush asked Dave to head the White House Initiative on Adoption. With his background as an adoptee and his stature in the business community, he accepted the challenge of raising awareness for the cause. Dave found that there were several obstacles to adoption: the red tape and paperwork was usually overwhelming, and the process too expensive for prospective parents. There were families in America who wanted to adopt, but the obstacles were often too great.

With this focus, Dave set his course. He devoted time and energy to special adoption programs, including a letter-writing campaign to Fortune 1000 CEOs asking them to make adoption benefits available to their employees. He also met with U.S. Governors and asked them to offer adoption benefits to state employees.

In 1992, he established the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, a not-for-profit organization that provides grants to national and regional adoption organizations for programs that raise awareness and make adoption easier and more affordable.

He realized many successes in his work for the cause. In 1996 President Clinton signed the Tax Credit Bill into law that gives adoptive parents a one-time tax credit of \$5,000 when they adopt. And in 1997, President Clinton signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which reduces waiting time for children in foster care, speeds up the adoption process and has built-in accountability and state incentives.

These two bills have reduced some of the obstacles to adoption in making the process easier and more affordable. In an effort to bring more attention to the cause, Dave and his foundation partnered with the U.S. Postal Service to create the 33-cent adoption postage stamp. It was unveiled in October 1999 with Rosie O'Donnell at Rockefeller Center, and was available in May 2000. The colorful stamp featured the phrases "Adopting a Child, Shaping a Life, Building a Home, Creating a World".

"Giving Back"

While much of Dave's time was focused on the cause of adoption, he actively supported many other community organizations that improved the lives of children.

He was a long-time supporter of the Children's Hospital in Columbus and was instrumental in creating the Gordon Teter Chair for Pediatric Cancer Research in honor of Wendy's late chairman. Additionally, he created the Dave Thomas Family Primary Care Center at the hospital with a \$1 million donation. An earlier contribution created the Dave and Lorraine Thomas Clinical Laboratory.

Dave contributed \$2 million in cash and stock to the Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital at The Ohio State University. This contribution established the R. David Thomas Outpatient Chemotherapy Center at the hospital.

He and his wife Lorraine supported the Children's Home Society of Florida, providing seed money to build a temporary home for children in Ft. Lauderdale. Called the I. Lorraine Thomas Children's Emergency Home and Family Support Center, the home has room for 28 children who are in protective custody.

Dave supported many other organizations including St. Jude Children's Cancer Research Center in Memphis, and Charity Newsies and Recreation Unlimited, two Columbus-based organizations.

A strong believer in education, Dave established the Thomas Center at Duke University. The Center houses the Fuqua School of Business' Executive Education programs. He also supported the Enterprise Ambassador Program at Nova University in South Florida. The program introduces the free enterprise system to high school students through classes and a mentoring program. Dave was also a founder of The Wellington School, a private school in Columbus, Ohio.

Dave's commitment to Wendy's and to children is what motivated him to continue working when others might have retired. He accomplished a great deal in his life, but considered his family – his wife Lorraine, their five children and 16 grandchildren – his greatest accomplishment.

Dave's Five Values

Dave's real genius was his simplicity. When he talked, people listened – not just out of respect, but because they knew they would learn something. His straightforward messages about quality, integrity, respect, pride and responsibility were important lessons – for business and for life.

Dave's honesty and integrity showed in his words and his actions, and he lived his life by a strong set of values and encouraged others to do the same. Here are the values by which Dave lived his life.

I. Quality is Our Recipe

Dave loved people and he loved restaurants. And he was passionate about quality. When he talked about quality, it wasn't just the food served at Wendy's. Quality meant **everything** to Dave. His passion was so strong that he made "Quality Is Our Recipe" a permanent part of Wendy's logo.

Dave liked to say that Wendy's hamburgers were square because "we don't cut corners." That simple saying underscored his belief that quality always comes first. When you passionately believe in quality, as Dave did, it becomes part of your everyday life – in how you work; how you treat your customers and your staff; and how you live your personal life.

He believed that at Wendy's everyone should have an MBA – a "Mop Bucket Attitude" and that we should all treat every customer as if our jobs depended on it – because they do!"

II. Do the Right Thing

Dave lived his life with honesty and integrity. He was a man of his word, and he believed that if you *say* you're going to do something, *do* it. He considered personal integrity to be the most important value one can have.

He taught us that it wasn't really that hard to make a tough decision. Examine the situation, especially a difficult one, and simply choose to do the right thing.

Doing the right thing is the best choice because you earn your reputation by the things you do every day.

He knew that the reason many people make the wrong decision is because they try to take a short cut that might save time and money. Dave, though, would say you'd probably lose in the long run. When faced with a choice, how do you know the right thing to do? Talk to people you respect and trust your instincts. Dave often sought advice from people he admired, then made the best decision based on their insights and his instincts.

Dave practiced what he preached and was honest about the mistakes he made in his life. And one that really bothered him was his decision to drop out of school at age 15 to work full-time. It took him 45 years to do it, but he went back to school and got his GED diploma. He knew that was the right thing to do. And his classmates voted him "Most Likely to Succeed."

III. Treat People with Respect

Dave lived by the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you want to be treated. He simplified this by saying, **Just Be Nice**.

Dave loved quality ... and he loved people. To Dave, being nice meant talking to people honestly. It might mean telling them news they may not want to hear. But he knew that if you treat them with respect and dignity they are more likely to accept what you have to say. Being nice also means being a good listener. It's a sign of respect, and you'll learn more by listening, he would always say.

Through his television commercials, Dave became an American icon. He met presidents, sports superstars and celebrities, and he could relate to anyone, regardless of background or occupation. He was most comfortable behind the grill — in his trademark white, short-sleeve shirt and bright red tie — talking to the crew. He was always friendly and respectful. He mentioned their name and gave them a lapel pin. It may seem simple, but being respectful and treating others like you want to be treated will be returned to you again and again.

IV. Profit is Not a Dirty Word

There's nothing wrong with making a profit and taking pride in your success. To Dave, profit in business meant growth and opportunities. It also meant being able to share your success with your team and your community.

When you take care of your business — through hard work, a focus on quality and taking care of your customers — your business will take care of you. Dave overcame tremendous obstacles in his life, growing up as an orphan who never knew his birth parents. He believed that America was the greatest country in the world because, "You can be whatever you want to be within the laws of God and man."

He believed that teamwork was the key to success. Dave liked to say, "There's no 'I' in Wendy's. The first two letters are WE." He believed everyone has a role to play and every person is important. He believed leaders should give their people the tools they need to do their job, motivate them, and then trust them to get the job done.

Dave wanted everyone to have a chance to succeed, and he created opportunities for thousands of people to be successful. Dave wanted to share his success with others, to give everyone a piece of the pie. And if there wasn't enough to go around, he'd make a bigger pie.

V. Giving Back

Dave believed everyone has a responsibility to give something back — to help those who can't help themselves. Giving back doesn't simply mean giving money to charities. It also means giving your time or sharing your special skills.

What do you have to offer? Energy and enthusiasm? A unique talent? There are hundreds of organizations that need passionate volunteers. Dave believed the more you *give*, the more you *get* in return.

Mentoring — sharing your experiences with someone — was one of Dave’s favorite ways to give back. He credited several mentors in his life for making him successful. Dave said he didn’t wait for them to take him under their wing. He found people he respected professionally and personally and crawled under their wing. He absorbed their knowledge, put it to work, then later mentored others interested in learning from him.

Dave was a national advocate for adoption, a cause very close to his heart. Adopted as a child, Dave believed every youngster deserves a permanent home and loving family. His passion led to the creation of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, dedicated to dramatically increasing the number of adoptions in North America. Dave said if just one child got adopted, all the effort would be worth it.