

SAVING SOULS

Suzy Bibko talks with Peter H Thomas of LifePilot in anticipation of his workshop at Campden's Families in Business Conference, to be held in New York in October this year, to learn about the role values play in family business

When I first heard the name of Peter Thomas' organisation, LifePilot, I thought it was a group providing life-saving charitable air flights for organ transplant recipients and the seriously ill. But after speaking with Thomas, it turns out I wasn't as far off target as I thought. After all, saving lives doesn't just pertain to muscle and bone – it can also include saving souls.

Peter Thomas, 67, developed LifePilot, an organisation that runs programmes on leading a valued life. Part-inspirational speaking, part-self-help programme, Thomas developed the organisation after tragedy struck in 2000. At the time, Thomas was the high-flying and highly successful CEO of real estate company Century 21 for Canada. That quickly changed, however, when Thomas' 35-year old son Todd committed suicide by jumping from The Plaza hotel in New York City. All of a sudden, things weren't as rosy as they seemed. Thomas admits to, understandably, being at a low point for a few years – not thinking, not planning, not caring what went on: "I just continued to exist".

In what almost seems like divine intervention, Thomas finally emerged from that haze with the help of a colleague. Thomas was on the board of the World Presidents Organization (WPO) and was having a board meeting on his boat. Attending the meeting was Paul Robshaw, the chairman of WPO at the time. Robshaw happened to pick up a binder of materials sitting on Thomas' desk and started to flip through it. Robshaw seemed keenly interested in the book and asked Thomas what it was. Thomas said it was his "dream book" – his diary, personal notes, a plan on how to live his life, notes for mentoring others, and more. Robshaw asked if he could read



through it and then disappeared. Three hours later Robshaw returned and asked if he could make a copy of it. Thomas agreed and that seemed to be the end of it – or so he thought.

A few months later, Robshaw called Thomas and asked him to come to Austin, Texas to speak to some WPO Forum members. Thomas agreed, and talked to a group of CEOs about his 'dream book'. After the meeting, Robshaw suggested Thomas take the show on the road: teaching CEOs all over the world, while raising money in the memory of Thomas' son. The seeds of LifePilot were sown.

Today, LifePilot is an organisation that teaches people how to lead a 'value driven life'. This means exactly what it says – figuring out your values and letting those values guide your every decision. Thomas' workshops help you work out what those values are. Prior to attending a LifePilot workshop, an attendee is asked to write down every single thing he does in his day. At the workshop, a considerable amount of time is focused on discovering each attendee's values. Then the attendee measures his daily diary – what he does all day – against his values. "That's usually a wakeup call", says Thomas. ►



Spreading the word: Peter Thomas lectures worldwide on the value of values

LIFEPILOT WORKSHOP: FURTHER INFORMATION

Peter Thomas will be holding a LifePilot workshop on 11 October 2006 in conjunction with Campden's Families in Business Conference on 12-13 October 2006 in New York, NY.

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Isn't this common sense? After all, most people know what values they hold dear and most people try to lead a good life. Why would people pay to have someone tell them such basic tenets? Thomas freely admits it's not for everyone and that there are those who "attend the course, go home and never think about it again". But there are those who are too busy to think about anything but work and money and never spend any time actively thinking about or acting on their values. "You know it's common sense, but you don't do it. You're busy. It's a wake-up call."

But if you're too busy, how do you reconcile your values with reality? After all, we all need to pay the bills. Thomas' take on this conundrum is refreshing and soundly based in real life: "Family is important and so is bringing home the paycheck. But bringing home the paycheck is one of your values – that of providing for your family. The key to being happy is knowing you have to do that work, but being happy where you work."

Okay, but this was coming from a guy who wasn't having any difficulty paying the bills. I had to ask the obvious: "Isn't it a whole lot easier to practice what you preach when you already have a lot of money in the bank?"

"Financial implications may make decisions seem difficult," answers Thomas, "but they aren't. If you think about what you really want to do in life, if you make it a goal, a proper goal, you can make it happen. People are comfortable, which can make decisions difficult. The difference between a rut and grave is the length and the depth."

Thomas certainly believes in his ideas and truly wants to help other people lead a value driven life. And it extends beyond the workshops. A unique, and noble feature of LifePilot is that it is a not-for-profit organisation; the net profits are poured into the LifePilot community programming and the Todd Thomas Foundation and Thomas Foundation. Thomas also takes no salary from LifePilot and anything that can't be funded by ticket sales to the LifePilot workshops is funded personally by Thomas. Thomas says this was the whole *raison d'être* for starting LifePilot – to raise money for the foundations, which help a wide variety of charities around the world, many focused on children.

Thomas has also developed an interesting fundraising method. Drawing on his vast network of wealthy business colleagues, he finds someone to 'champion' a LifePilot event. What this involves is asking the champion (host) to hold an event at his home. The event includes an afternoon LifePilot workshop and a black-tie dinner in the evening. One hundred people are invited to attend and the participants are asked to donate items to an auction that will be held at the dinner. The donations usually result in about \$100,000 of items to auction off. The ticket sales proceeds go to Thomas' foundations, but the auction proceeds are split between Thomas' foundations and the host's foundation/charity of his choice. So, even if you don't personally gain anything from the LifePilot course, you know your course fees (and proceeds from the auction) will be for the benefit of someone else.

But it's not just the funds raised by LifePilot that help people. LifePilot also has a series of community services that it offers at no charge to the recipients. One recent programme took place at Buckeye Jail in Arizona, where Thomas taught the LifePilot course to convicts. Thomas says it was an amazing experience and the pris-

oners were unbelievably receptive to the programme. In fact, he said that he got more interaction from the prison participants than he does in a normal CEO workshop. “They have a different psychology”, says Thomas. “One of the prisoners had 32 arrests. Many are scared of the outside and keep going back. They actually want to get caught.” The programme was so successful that the Dean of the Arizona State University, Leanne Atwater, has offered to help teach additional LifePilot programmes to the inmates.

Another community service programme involves elementary school children. The programme includes a values-based book series with Bigsbee the bumblebee by author Jennifer Carroll. Aerodynamically, bumblebees shouldn’t be able to fly – their bodies are too big for their wings. But the bee doesn’t know that and flies in spite of this challenge. This specific LifePilot programme is about ‘teaching children to fly’: to inspire children around the world to recognise their own brilliance in life by teaching them about the fundamental importance of values and to look to their values for guidance as they reach various road-blocks in life. It’s the first LifePilot programme for children and is being launched on 17 June in Scottsdale, Arizona. If history repeats itself, it should be a success.

Thomas says that LifePilot has been a phenomenal help for him also. One problem that many people, especially in family businesses, face is the challenge of letting go. Thomas says that because CEOs are so identified with the business, they tend to see themselves as the extension of the business. “When I was at Century 21”, recalls Thomas, “people would introduce me as ‘Peter Thomas, chairman of Century 21’. After I sold the company, I would say, ‘I’m Peter Thomas, I used to be chairman of Century 21’. It took me several years to stop doing that.”

After Thomas’ son died, Thomas learned there was a whole world he wasn’t aware of. “I gave money away, I was charitable, but I really just gave it away to where I thought it would do good,” says Thomas. “But when I lost Todd, I looked at it with a new set of eyes. There are foundations, there are boards of directors, and all kinds of organisations that could use the business acumen of people like myself, who understand the rules of business.”

LifePilot also seems to have helped Thomas stay connected with his son: “I feel as close to Todd now as I did when he was alive. He’s part of the LifePilot workshop. I talk about him every day. He’s my guardian angel. There are times when I miss him and I cry. But most of the time I feel good; everything we do in this cause is a tribute to Todd and his life.”

Thomas has certainly experienced both the highs and lows of life. It’s a life where he’s had to accept change – not always for the better. Change is something people, by nature, are resistant to. People stay in jobs they don’t like because it gives them a sense of security. So, they stay with it, and hate it, but do it because a bad job is better than no job. Instead, Thomas says, we need to figure out what we value and hold dear and guide every decision by those values: “As Darwin said, it’s not the strongest of species that survive, but those that adapt. You have to be open to change and have the disciplines to effect those changes.” Out of this world advice for those on the ground. ■

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Values-driven: LifePilot initiate a community service programme with children