

National Association of Black Journalists

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NABJ

journal



WASH



Pierre
Thomas

Journalist
of the
Year

Journalist of the Year



Photos by MARK GAIL

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

Pierre Thomas never sought a broadcast journalism career, it sought him. His decision to move from print to broadcast, a decision he mulled for three weeks, has reaped rewards and awards, including the National Association of Black Journalists' 2012 Journalist of the Year award.

By Kimberly N. Alleyne

Thomas, who is senior justice correspondent at ABC News, keeps a red, patchwork quilt that his mom made neatly folded on his office couch, where he sometimes sleeps when he cannot get home to his wife Alyson and son, Nathaniel, 9.

Thomas used that quilt and couch several nights in 2011.

"Last year, there were about 14 nights where I got zero to two hours of sleep," says Thomas.

Stories such as the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden, the capture and arrest of fugitive gangster

Whitey Bulger, and the Tucson, Ariz., shooting where then-Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was shot led to those long nights. That body of stories is also why he received NABJ's esteemed award.

While many awards line the window sill behind his desk, the NABJ honor evokes a deluge of emotions in Thomas.

"I cannot tell you how gratifying it is to be honored by your own peers and for it to be NABJ, my emotions are intense and I am very thankful," Thomas offers in a near-whisper.

The award reminds him of the privilege to do a job that he says "when done well, is a public service." The recognition also adds another level of gratification for that job.

"There was a point late last year that I was thinking, 'I am really tired,' and I thought about all of those stories, and I thought about those nights with little or no sleep. For NABJ to honor me for that work is like putting a nice bow on all of it," Thomas says.

Thomas, 50, grew up in Amherst County, Va., in a neighborhood where he says everyone knew everyone. It is where he learned the value of hard work, which still fuels his push for excellence.

"I learned my work ethos from my father. He was a hard-working man and I remember there was one stretch that he did not miss a day of work for 10 years," marvels Thomas. "That just instilled in me to show up and do the job."

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Thomas's reputation is not for merely showing up. His talent for unearthing big-picture stories such as how high school drop-out rates contribute to crime rates have earned him a reputation as a hard-hitting, but fair journalist.

Before joining ABC News in 2000, the Virginia Tech graduate first worked at the *Roanoke Times*, and then the *Washington Post*, where Thomas says he "grew up."

"I started at the *Washington Post* when I was 24, and now I realize how inexperienced I was. The *Washington Post* is where I figured out what kind of journalist I wanted to be, and I figured out what my ethics and standards were going to be," Thomas recalls.

Jack Date, a senior producer at ABC News, says Thomas has been a friend and a mentor. Date also worked with Thomas at CNN, where Thomas first made the transition from print to broadcast journalism.

"I cannot tell you how gratifying it is to be honored by your own peers and for it to be NABJ, my emotions are intense and I am very thankful."

"Pierre has taught me a lot about fairness, accuracy, ethics, and sourcing," Date says. "I have carried those lessons with me throughout my career and they have made me a better journalist. He is the embodiment of fair and accurate journalism."

Thomas does not neglect mentioning the diverse cadre of colleagues who mentored him and help shape him as a journalist.

"At the *Post*, I had Bob Woodward and David Broder. At CNN, I had Bernie Shaw. At ABC, Peter Jennings trusted me to be on his show early on and that, I think, was really critical to my success at ABC News," Thomas says.

"I take my job really seriously, and that may sound old-school, but think about it: We get to inform people about things that may be important to them, and that is a very serious job," he continues. "I want my legacy to be that I operated at a high level and pursued excellence as a general course of action."

