

St. Louis Character: Andy Thorp's road to Miriam went through Jersey – and Zaire

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A New Jersey native, Andy Thorp came to St. Louis by way of Zaire.

Thorp, who is executive director at the Webster Groves-based Miriam: The Learning Disability Experts, spent two years after college teaching high school history before joining the Peace Corps and traveling to Zaire to join an



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agricultural extension. It was there that he met his wife, Lisa, a St. Louis native. After two years in Zaire, the two came back to Des Peres to get married, then went back to Zaire for a third year.

“That almost seems like a different lifetime,” said Thorp, 51.

Since taking the reins at Miriam a decade ago, Thorp has helped the organization expand its services beyond the Miriam School, a K-8 school for children with learning disabilities. He spearheaded the creation in 2007 of the Miriam Learning Center, which now serves nearly 900 students through after school programs and partnerships with charter and private schools. And now

he's leading the charge to add a new high school to Miriam's offerings. The Miriam Academy high school will open this fall in an education building at the Parkway United Church at 2841 N. Ballas Road in Town & Country.

Thorp also is leading a \$9 million capital campaign for Miriam, with \$6 million already raised. Of the \$9 million, about \$5 million will go toward the high school (\$3 million for endowment and \$2 million for operations for the first four years), and \$4 million will be for enhancements for the K-8 school.

"Andy's background and training have made him a strong believer in consensus and team building," said Anne Tolan, former chair of Miriam's board. "Yet, he also has an innate sense of determination and a strong competitive spirit. This has proven to be a winning combination. Andy finds the right people to help him reach his goals and then just keeps driving forward until the goal is met — and always with his sense of humor intact."

Prior to joining Miriam, Thorp spent 10 years with the Coro Leadership Center, serving as program director, training director, associate executive director and finally executive director.

Thorp and his wife have three sons — two in college and one in high school — and live in the Tower Grove East neighborhood.

What prompted the decision to add the high school at Miriam?

For years, families had come to us when their children hit eighth grade and said, 'Where are we going to go?' There are some good alternatives out there for some kids, but some kids really need additional assistance. We always said it wasn't the right time. But the right people came forward, and we finally said — now is the right time. We have the right funding, the right leadership in place, and if not now, when?

You've been with Miriam 10 years. What have been the highlights?

When I came to Miriam one part of my job was to take a look at the board. When I got here, the board didn't have any term limits, and it was all Miriam

membership, so it was all Jewish women. It didn't have a lot of diversity. So we had to figure out a way to transition that board to keep the connection to our legacy, which is so important to us, but also to begin looking a little bit more like a typical nonprofit board. One of my accomplishments was adding the first man to the board. It's odd to say that that's diversity. We also got more corporate representation on the board and looked at adding different levels of expertise. That was really important those first few years.

Other accomplishments here?

One was the capital campaign to build the gym. That was a \$2.4 million campaign in 2010. Then I have to say the development of the Learning Center, which came out of strategic planning. We actually competed at the Skandalaris Center at Washington University, and we were one of the winners in 2007. We started it as kind of a pilot program, and it grew from nothing to serving hundreds of kids now and from a zero budget to this year we'll have \$1 million in revenue from the Learning Center.

What's the day-to-day like for you?

The last six months it's been all about the high school and making sure the details are all in place. People tell me that I often am pushing the envelope in terms of what we can do as an organization. That's part of what I do — making sure the organization has the strategic things in mind in terms of what's next.

What stands out about your time at Coro?

What I loved about Coro was you really had your ear to the ground as to what was going on. I really missed that for a couple years. Coro is not just about education, it's not just about business, it's not just about government, it's not just about the media. It's about how all these things intersect to make our system work. So at Coro, you know what's going on in the political world, in nonprofits, in government. It was a challenge to raise money for a leadership organization. It's easier to raise money for kids. And while not having a lot of resources was not fun a lot of times, I learned how to do a lot of different

things — whether it was fixing copiers or computers or whatever it might be.

What made you decide to join the Peace Corps?

I had done a couple trips to Africa before. And during one summer of traveling, I spent a couple weeks with a Presbyterian minister in a tiny village. He lived in a little mud hut like the rest of the population, and I really loved that. I wanted to get a sense of what that was like, living like these local people, and I thought I could do that in the Peace Corps. I initially applied for the Peace Corps, and they turned me down. So I wrote an appeal letter — just on a piece of paper, and I guess a recruiter put it up on his bulletin board. I had already moved on and was looking into faith-based opportunities overseas when the recruiter called me up and said, ‘I might have something you’d be interested in.’ I didn’t care where I went, but I ended up going to central Africa.

What did you do there?

It was the agriculture extension. We would get improved seed and improved methods of planting, train in it and then do demonstration fields with the farmers. It’s cliché, but I learned a lot about people being the same wherever you are. There are good people and bad people wherever you go. And the Peace Corps gives you some perspective on what’s important. When you see people struggling with day-to-day needs — water, food, health — it puts things in perspective.

You’re a Quaker?

Yes. There’s only one Quaker meeting house in town. It’s in Soulard. I’m active on their church council. My parents converted from Presbyterianism when I was very young, so I wasn’t a birthright Quaker, but I was raised in that tradition. I actually went to a Quaker private school in Philadelphia.

What are you doing when you’re not at work?

We live in the Tower Grove East neighborhood in a 1904 house. It certainly

has its charms but also has its challenges. I used to run a whole lot until my back went bad, and now I swim with the Masters Swim Team — Masters means old — at the South City Family Y twice a week. I also volunteer for ITEF — the Innovative Technology in Education Fund board. And my wife and I recently adopted a pit bull from Stray Rescue. We've been working to train her to not chew things.

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