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# Celebrity and charity: A historical case study of Danny Thomas and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, 1962-1991

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## Abstract

*Using historical methods, this paper presents a case study of celebrity Danny Thomas and his efforts to found successful non-profit health organisation, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Through historical documents, relevant media coverage, and interviews, this study reviews Thomas' relationship-building strategies and public response from numerous stakeholders from 1962 to 1991. The paper also examines St. Jude's various communication and fundraising tactics, which have helped cultivate these relationships to create long-lasting public support for the organisation.*

## Introduction

“Help me find my way in life, and I will build you a shrine” (Thomas & Davidson, 1991, p. 78). Danny Thomas whispered these words to a statue of St. Jude Thaddeus, the patron saint of hopeless causes, in a Detroit church during the Great Depression. At the time, Thomas was a struggling entertainer whose wife was pregnant with their first child. He had a job at a local radio station, but a week before his baby was due, he had only \$7 to his name (Thomas & Davidson, 1991).

In despair, he went to church and gave his usual dollar offering. According to his autobiography, Thomas became emotional listening to the priest, and gave his last \$7 to the church. Realising what he had done, Thomas knelt on the altar and prayed, “I've given you my last seven bucks. I need it back tenfold because I've got a kid on the way and I have to pay a hospital bill” (Thomas & Davidson, 1991, p. 69). The next day, Thomas got a call about performing in a skit at a Maytag washing machine sales

convention. Thomas thought of it as a menial job, but the pay was \$75. A few days later, Marlo Thomas was born, and Thomas and his wife paid the hospital bill in cash (Thomas & Davidson, 1991).

The Thomas family continued to struggle, however, and Thomas continued to pray to St. Jude. “If he was supposed to be the saint of the hopeless, that certainly included me. If ever a guy felt hopeless in his work, I did and I told him so” (Thomas & Davidson, 1991, p. 78). Eventually, Thomas found success and international fame as an entertainer. And 20 years later, he began fundraising efforts for what would become St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee is one of the world's premier centres for research and treatment of catastrophic diseases in children, including paediatric cancer, genetic disorders, and paediatric HIV (ALSAC/St. Jude, n.d.). St. Jude has treated children from all 50 states of America and more than 80 countries. Children come to St. Jude through physician referral when they are first diagnosed with a disease under research or treatment at the hospital (ALSAC/St. Jude, n.d.).

St. Jude is the only paediatric hospital in the world where families never pay for treatment beyond what their insurance covers, and families without insurance are never asked to pay. The hospital receives federal funding from the National Institutes of Health and the National Cancer Institute, but the majority of its operating costs, which total more than \$1 million per day, are paid for by private contributions (ALSAC/St. Jude, n.d.). St. Jude relies on its fundraising organisation, the American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities (ALSAC; hereafter referred to as ALSAC/St. Jude) to raise most of these funds.

Today, ALSAC/St. Jude is one of the nation's largest health-care charities and consistently ranks among *The Non-Profit Times* (2007) 'Top 100' non-profit organisations.

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital likely would not exist today without the work of Thomas. How did a celebrity help create one of the world's most successful non-profit health organisations? And how did the organisation build and maintain public support? By examining media coverage and public response to Thomas and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, this study seeks to determine how one celebrity leveraged his relationships to create one of the world's most successful charities. Additionally, this paper investigates how ALSAC/St. Jude capitalised on these relationships to gain publicity and support for Thomas' cause. This case study reviews media coverage and historical documents about Thomas and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital from 1962, the year the hospital opened, to 1991, the year Thomas died. Through interviews and research of relevant books, newspapers and magazines, this paper employs what some historians have called 'content assessment', a method involving "reading, sifting, weighing, comparing and analyzing the evidence in order to tell the story" (Marzolf, 1978, p. 15; Kitch, 1998).

### **Relationship management**

Public relations scholars often refer to relationship building and relationship management as an important function of the field (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997; Ferguson, 1984; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham, 2003; Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru & Ogata Jones, 2003). Indeed, public relations practitioners develop relationships among organisations and various publics on a regular basis. According to Cutlip, Center and Broom (1994) public relations is, "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (p. 2). Relationship management

theory focuses on organisations managing mutually beneficial relationships with various publics, positing that the impact of public relations should be evaluated not by communication outputs, but by the role of communication in initiating and maintaining quality relationships (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Ledingham, 2006).

Relationships are especially important for non-profit organisations, which are dependent on the generosity of individual donors and the philanthropy of corporations to fulfil their missions and achieve their goals (Hall, 2002; O'Neil, 2007; Sargeant, 2001; Waters, 2008). In her extensive research on fundraising, Kelly (1998; 2001) introduced stewardship as one of the most important concepts of the public relations and fundraising process. Subsequent research has affirmed that stewardship is an important component of relationship management and the four components of stewardship—reciprocity, responsibility, reporting and relationship nurturing—should be used to foster relationships with donor publics (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelly, 2001; Ledingham, 2003; Waters, 2008; 2009).

While public relations and fundraising professionals are instrumental in forming and cultivating relationships among various donor publics, many non-profit organisations leverage other important stakeholders, such as board members, volunteers, and the people the organisation serves, to help build relationships. Increasingly, it seems, celebrities also serve as the 'face' for non-profit organisations, helping to build bridges between unknown causes and often adoring publics. This was certainly true for Thomas and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, and ALSAC/St. Jude has capitalised on its celebrity roots to build and maintain relationships over the years. While limited to the history of one non-profit organisation, the purpose of this case study is to explore how celebrities and other stakeholders can inspire relationships and support among media, donors and other publics, which public relations and fundraising practitioners can manage and cultivate through communication and continued stewardship.

## Celebrities in the news

Celebrities have always been a natural source of news and entertainment for media, and media coverage of celebrities has increased in recent years with the rise of daily entertainment news programmes and 24-hour news. According to Gamson (1992, p. 13): “The outlets for publicity have exploded with the success, beginning in the early 1970s, of magazine and newspaper writing about ‘people’ and ‘personality’.” Organisations have long used celebrities to sell a product or image, and celebrities have relied on media to promote a message or cause. Non-profit organisations often rely on celebrities as spokespeople to help ‘brand’ the organisation and gain media attention, with mixed results (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Toncar, Reid, & Anderson, 2007).

While some celebrities take advantage of their fame to publicise altruistic endeavours, the organisations that they support generally benefit from the media attention. Today, there is no shortage of celebrity humanitarians using fame, fortune and the media to make a difference. For instance, Time magazine named Bono of U2, and Microsoft moguls Bill and Melinda Gates the “Persons of the Year,” in recognition of their philanthropic work (Gibbs, 2005). A related article mentions actress Angelina Jolie's work with the United Nations as yet another example of “celebrity do-gooderism” (Poniewozik, 2005).

One scholarly article about “medicine, media and celebrities” examines news coverage of breast cancer from 1960-1995, noting that non-profit organisations have long relied on mass media and celebrities to raise awareness for an illness or cause (Corbett & Mori, 1999, p. 229). A news article notes that “nonprofits need care, time to draw celebrities,” except in the rare instances when a celebrity has a personal connection to a charity, such as previously benefiting from or even founding the non-profit organisation (Buggs, 2008), which was the case for Thomas and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Thomas helped create ALSAC/St.

Jude, and relied on countless relationships and resources to lead it to success. In his words: “I believe show business has only been a vehicle to fulfil my destiny to establish St. Jude. Founding that hospital is the highlight of my life” (Jones, 1996, p. 182). This case study may help illustrate the role of celebrities in non-profit relationship building and organisational stewardship by providing an early example of a celebrity who helped push a non-profit organisation onto the national agenda, influencing not only media coverage but also public response to a cause.

## Thomas' rise to fame

Thomas' background and struggle to fame became instrumental in his founding and early fundraising efforts for ALSAC/St. Jude. Thomas was one of nine children born to Lebanese parents (Thomas & Davidson, 1991). His name at birth, Muzyad Yakhoob, was changed to Amos Jacobs to sound more American. When he was 10 years old, he began selling candy at the Empire Burlesque Theater in Toledo, Ohio, and he fell in love with entertainment. By 19, he had a regular spot on a Detroit amateur radio show. It was there that he met a singer named Rose Marie, who later became his wife. Shortly after their first child was born in 1937, the couple moved to Chicago, where Thomas quickly found work in radio and then in nightclubs, including a weekly gig at The 5100 Club. He didn't want family and friends to know that he was still struggling to make it, so when the club asked what he wanted on the marquee, he combined two of his brothers' names to create his new name, Danny Thomas. A few years later, New York talent agent Abe Lastfogel saw Thomas' show in Chicago, recognised his talent, and soon began managing his career (Thomas & Davidson, 1991). They moved to Hollywood, and Thomas began working in television and film. By 1953, he had helped create a popular sit-com called *Make Room for Daddy* (later called *The Danny Thomas Show*), about an entertainer and his family. The show lasted for 12 years, and it turned Thomas into a household name (Jones, 1996).

## **The making of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital**

Thomas had prayed to St. Jude throughout the years, and he didn't forget his early promise to the saint as he gained fame and wealth. He told his boyhood priest and long-time friend, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Chicago Samuel Cardinal Stritch, about his idea to honour St. Jude with a shrine. Their conversations shaped Thomas' idea of a statue or shrine into a "hospital for needy children, a place where they would be cared for regardless of race, religion or ability to pay" (Jones, 1996, p. 9). Thomas went back to Hollywood and told his agent about the idea. Lastfogel suggested they "form a foundation, organise a board of directors and get started" (Jones, 1996, p. 9). Thus, the idea for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital was born. In early 1951, Thomas met with a small group of friends to form the St. Jude Hospital Foundation of California. In December that same year, the group organised its first big fundraising event at a Chicago theatre. It was the Midwest premiere of *I'll See You in My Dreams*, Thomas' new film co-starring Doris Day, and it raised \$51,000 (Jones, 1996).

Cardinal Stritch recommended Memphis, Tennessee for the hospital's location because he had lived there and knew the needs of the poor community, which was struggling socially and economically at the time. He also had relationships with citizens there who could help. Thomas and Lastfogel flew to Memphis and met with two attorneys, a banker, and a newspaper columnist. The group, which became known as the Memphis Steering Committee, agreed that the city of Memphis would raise \$500,000 and Thomas' St. Jude Hospital Foundation of California would raise \$1.5 million (Jones, 1996).

Thomas was still envisioning a small clinic or a general paediatric hospital, but the Memphis medical community had other plans. A medical advisory committee developed with the help of Dr. Lemuel Diggs, a professor of medicine at the University of Tennessee and the only doctor in Memphis involved in leukaemia and sickle cell

research. Dr. Diggs suggested the hospital treat children with such diseases, and also insisted that it focus on related research (Jones, 1996).

With a clear mission in mind, the Memphis committees set out to gain support from the community. They took advantage of Thomas' relationships by planning a fundraising event with the celebrities of the day. The Mayor declared 'Danny Thomas Week' so that Memphis residents could "acquaint themselves with Danny Thomas and his hopes and dreams for St. Jude Hospital" (Jones, 1996, p. 13). The actor spent two weeks in Memphis, asking everyone he met to help him fulfil his dream. Around the same time, Thomas appeared on the television game show *Break the Bank*. In the first of many examples of Thomas using his celebrity and charm to help raise funds and awareness for his cause, he asked healthy children watching the show to break their piggy banks and send just one dollar to help him build his hospital. The Memphis post office was inundated with mail, and people stopped Thomas on the streets of New York, in the airport, and on the plane to give him money (Jones, 1996).

### **Early relationship building bolsters support**

Thomas leveraged his Lebanese heritage and religious faith to build relationships and gain support for the hospital. He reached out to Arab American organisations across the country by saying: "What I want to see is something in which we can all take part, because in helping children we reaffirm man's faith in man and only when that is done can we possibly reaffirm man's faith in God. Further, we would be repaying this great nation for the freedom it gave our parents and grandparents" (Jones, 1996, p. 17).

Arab-American organisations across the nation had raised funds for various charities, but they had never before been united for one cause (Jones, 1996). Thomas invited more than a dozen of these organisational leaders to a meeting where he showed plans for the hospital and explained that he had most of the funds needed to build a hospital, but he did not have an organisation dedicated to securing the funds

for the hospital's daily operation. In October 1957, a group of these leaders (then Thomas' friends) met and formed the hospital's official fundraising organisation, the American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities (ALSAC; commonly referred to as ALSAC/St. Jude), which supports the hospital to this day (Jones, 1996).

Michael Tamer, president of the Midwest Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs, became ALSAC's first national executive director. Tamer and the other founding members worked for ALSAC/St. Jude without pay. The first mailing asked every Arab-American to contribute \$5, or they could become a lifetime member of the organisation by contributing \$100. Tamer appointed 10 regional directors to organise nationwide chapters of ALSAC/St. Jude (Jones, 1996).

Meanwhile, Thomas and his wife toured the country by car, visiting 28 cities in 32 days, promoting his dream, building relationships, and raising funds through various events (Jones, 1996). In a telephone interview, Richard Shadyac, early board member, friend of Thomas, and later the CEO of ALSAC/St. Jude, recalled poker games among board members in which all of the money went to St. Jude (R. Shadyac, personal communication, February 23, 2006). At the first ALSAC/St. Jude national convention in 1958, more than 142 chapters had formed in 35 states, and almost \$160,000 had been raised for St. Jude Hospital (Jones, 1996).

On November 2, 1958, Thomas broke ground for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in front of 3,000 people in Memphis. National media, including The New York Times, covered the groundbreaking, stating that the hospital had been Thomas' dream for 21 years (presumably referring to Thomas' prayer to St. Jude in 1937). The article told the tale of Thomas' promise to St. Jude when he was a young, struggling actor ("Comic's 'Dream' Gains," 1958). This story became a legend promulgated by media, ALSAC/St. Jude staff, loyal donors and volunteers, and likely inspired the organisation's popularity

and fundraising success among certain publics.

Finally on February 4, 1962, Thomas dedicated St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in front of a crowd of more than 9,000. Thomas unveiled a 10-foot-tall white marble statue of St. Jude Thaddeus, which he ordered from Rome (Jones, 1996). An account of the hospital's opening ceremony quoted Thomas demonstrating the responsibility and reciprocity components of stewardship by publicly delivering on his promise and expressing gratitude to supporters:

A dream is one thing. A realization is something entirely separate. I publicly thank you, wherever you may be, for the support of this dream. It took a rabble rousing, hook-nosed comedian to get your attention, but it took your hearts, loving minds and generous souls to make it come true. If I were to die this minute, I would know why I was born (Jones, 1996, p. 25).

### **Early fundraising efforts**

The earliest fundraising for the hospital was spontaneous, often growing out of ALSAC/St. Jude board meetings. Board member Rich White had the idea for the first national fundraising campaign, the 'Teen Age March', in 1961. Paul Parham, ALSAC/St. Jude's first director of communications, stated in an email interview that Thomas recorded public service announcements for the campaign, which involved teenagers going door to door with buckets to collect money for St. Jude (P. Parham, personal communication, February 21, 2006). ALSAC/St. Jude was not the only organisation relying on celebrities or national campaigns to raise funds at the time; organisations such as the March of Dimes (2009) and Muscular Dystrophy Association (2009) were involved in similar efforts. However, St. Jude is a successful example of these early fundraising efforts nonetheless.

Of course, the organisation's communication and fundraising activities changed over time. According to former ALSAC/St. Jude CEO Shadyac, the efforts have become more professional, sophisticated, and strategic over

the years. There was always someone in charge of publicity or public relations, but Parham was the first 'significant' or official communications director that Shadyac could recall (R. Shadyac, personal communication, February 23, 2006)

ALSAC/St. Jude has always been strategic when it comes to using Thomas' face and name in communication efforts. In fact, they exemplify the advice given by public relations and non-profit experts, such as the following rule from *The Non-Profit Times* (n.d.): "Capitalize on the media exposure brought by a celebrity. Involve direct mail packages designed to move people from a personal attachment as the link (the celebrity) to the organisation's mission." ALSAC/St. Jude provides an early example of this practice. According to Parham (personal communication, February 21, 2006), the organisation started its direct mail fundraising campaign in 1962, the year the hospital opened, and letters included Thomas' signature from the beginning. Since then, ALSAC has employed additional techniques to cultivate donor relationships. In 1969, major contributors began receiving newsletters about the hospital, an example of the reporting and relationship nurturing strategies of stewardship. Three years later, the organisation started a sweepstakes programme that brought in 300,000 donations (Jones, 1996). In 1976, Parham (personal communication, February 21, 2006) began ghost writing a 'Message from Danny' column in donor newsletters.

In the beginning, letters and fundraising were directed mostly at Arab-Americans. Shadyac (personal communication, February 23, 2006) said Thomas wanted to reach out to 'his people', but he and other board members realised that if they wanted the hospital to thrive, they needed to reach out and appeal to all Americans. By 1980, ALSAC/St. Jude was mailing out 50 million letters, raising more than \$12 million (Jones, 1996). By 1991, the letters were bringing in more than \$24 million (ALSAC/St. Jude, 1991).

## **The power of broadcasting**

ALSAC/St. Jude has relied on radio and television to build relationships with the public since the 1960s, and Thomas and other celebrities certainly helped open the door for ALSAC/St. Jude staff to build relationships with broadcast media. Early public service announcements promoted local fundraising events and news about the hospital. In 1968, a Detroit radio station (where Thomas began his career) hosted the first St. Jude Radiothon, an event in which radio deejays talked about the hospital and asked for funds on air, while volunteers accepted donations from the public by phone (Jones, 1996).

In the 1980s, Thomas reached out to Randy Owen, of the musical group Alabama, to participate in St. Jude radiothons. Owen had donated to St. Jude for some time, and after visiting the hospital and meeting Thomas, Owen challenged the country music industry to join him in creating the 'Country Cares for St. Jude Kids' programme, one of ALSAC's fastest growing fundraising efforts (Jones, 1996). Owen continues to lead the programme's fundraising and awareness efforts and has helped build relationships with other celebrities in the country music industry, including Garth Brooks, Clint Black, Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, and Wynonna Judd. Since 1989, the Country Cares for St. Jude Kids (n.d.) programme has raised more than \$365 million for ALSAC/St. Jude.

Because of the high cost of television production, ALSAC/St. Jude took a more cautious approach to fundraising telethons. While organisations such as the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA, 2009b) conducted telethons as early as the 1950s, ALSAC/St. Jude's first attempt at a telethon came in 1976 in the form of videotaped amateur entertainment acts that were sent to regional television stations and integrated into live, local productions (Jones, 1996). The events were successful and the next year, Thomas hosted his first live telethon in Los Angeles. The five-hour broadcast raised \$338,664 for the hospital. The show was edited down to two-and-a-half hours of entertainment,

and ALSAC/St. Jude's regional offices worked with local TV stations and volunteers to create more than 20 successful telethons across the nation (Jones, 1996). The shows garnered national media attention, including a New York Times article that called the events a “groundbreaker” in the world of telethons. The article lists some of Thomas' celebrity friends who helped with the events: Jackie Gleason, Jack Lemmon, Merv Griffin, and Soupy Sales (“Danny Thomas Benefit set for 5 Hours May 29”, 1978).

Although the results were impressive, the telethons were labour intensive, and by 1980 the regional offices could no longer handle the amount of work they created (Jones, 1996). Again, ALSAC/St. Jude changed with the times, consolidated resources, and worked with a California production company to create a fully scripted, taped special featuring hospital staff, patients, and entertainers. The first special, *Let the Children Live*, starred Michael Landon and Dianna Canova as co-hosts, and aired in seven test markets in 1982. Six months later, the special had aired in 85 markets (Jones, 1996). In addition to generating funds, the specials informed a much wider audience about St. Jude, making it easier for ALSAC/St. Jude staff to cultivate relationships with the public through subsequent communication and fundraising efforts.

After testing various lengths for TV specials, ALSAC/St. Jude found a one-hour show to be most successful. Thomas co-hosted the show with his daughter, actress Marlo Thomas, who had become famous in her own right for her television show, *That Girl*, among other things. The special gave way to 60- and 120-second commercials, which appeared on large cable networks, allowing ALSAC/St. Jude to reach an even wider audience (Jones, 1996). The organisation eventually developed a broadcasting department to handle its success in radio and television. In 1991, television programmes raised more than \$16.7 million for ALSAC/St. Jude (1991). One-hour specials hosted by Marlo Thomas are still in production today, and can be seen on

television stations in more than 150 markets nationwide (ALSAC/St. Jude, n.d.b.)

### Celebrity fundraising events

Beyond broadcasting, Thomas' personal and professional ties to Hollywood turned celebrity events into lucrative vehicles for both fundraising and national publicity. Thomas hosted ‘Shower of Stars’ shows on stage throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Wayne Newton, Sammy Davis Jr., Paul Anka, and Frank Sinatra are just a few of Thomas' celebrity friends who attended these events (Jones, 1996). *The New York Times* publicised one of the earliest of these events; an ‘Evening with Danny Thomas’ at The Plaza in October 1962 included a cocktail reception and dinner featuring entertainment by Thomas, among others. The article included information on how the general public could purchase tickets to attend the event and support ALSAC/St. Jude (“Leukemia Group Lists Oct. 20 Fete,” 1962).

Thomas's wife, Rose Marie, produced one of the most successful fundraising dinners in 1979, raising \$426,000 for ALSAC/St. Jude (Jones, 1996). The following year, the gala featured entertainment from Frank Sinatra and gathered more than 2,000 people including celebrity friends, George Burns, Neil Diamond, Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, and Liza Minelli. The Beverly Hills event raised more than \$1 million, and eventually spawned similar events managed by ALSAC/St. Jude staff in Chicago, New York, and Miami (Jones, 1996).

Thomas' contacts extended beyond Hollywood to include celebrity athletes as well. The Memphis celebrity golf tournament has been one of St. Jude's most popular fundraising events for decades. Thomas officially paired his name and St. Jude as the beneficiary of the small Memphis tournament in 1970 (Jones, 1996). The event has changed names and formats over the years, but it has always drawn a crowd, not to mention media coverage. A *New York Times* article covered the 1970 tournament, along with the subsequent Saturday night event that assembled a “cast of Hollywood stars,” and 12,000 guests. About the

tournament, the article said: “A new era for the Memphis open begins tomorrow. After being a homely 12-year-old on the circuit, it will blossom with a touch of show business and be associated with a nationally known charity” (Werden, 1970). More recently, the tournament made headlines when celebrities such as Michael Jordan participated. A 1990 article in *The Commercial Appeal of Memphis* noted that Jordan was not only playing in the tournament, but also announcing a three-year pledge totalling \$55,000 (Hall, 1990). Jordan raised additional money for the hospital by charging for autographs at the event.

### **Other publicity surrounding ALSAC/St. Jude**

While Thomas' relationships with celebrities have been vital for ALSAC/St. Jude, one of the organisation's greatest strengths is that the cause seems to have mass appeal among many publics. It inspires people not only to donate but also to organise grassroots fundraising events and campaigns across the country. A *Washington Post* metro reporter wrote about the drivers of the Red Top Cab Company asking customers to ‘go an extra mile for Danny’ by donating extra fare to St. Jude (Eisen, 1983). The *St. Petersburg Times* published news about a local housing contractor who built a home in order to donate the proceeds from its sale to St. Jude (Pierce, 1988). *The Commercial Appeal* published a story about a Memphis man who asked friends to donate to St. Jude, rather than buying gifts for his 40th birthday (Donahue, 1991).

Of course, celebrities and fundraising events are not the only reasons ALSAC/St. Jude earns media attention. The hospital made national news again in 1985, when it considered moving to St. Louis, Missouri to become part of Washington University, which operated the largest university medical research programme in the United States at the time. *The New York Times* wrote about Memphis' fight to keep the hospital, quoting a representative from the mayor's office: “St. Jude is important to Memphis because it is

synonymous to Memphis. We're not going to give up without a fight.” He added: “it's a bit of an ego-bruising thing. We hate to lose anything with such a national aura” (“St. Jude Considers Move to St. Louis,” 1985). After some debate and much publicity, the hospital did not move to St. Louis; it remains in Memphis today.

Medical breakthroughs and stories about individual patients also keep St. Jude in the spotlight. *The St. Petersburg Times* wrote about the hospital “joining the search for an AIDS cure” in 1987 (“Compound is Found to Fight Cancers,” 1987). The article quoted Thomas, who said: “How can we stand by and let these kids die, these holy innocents” (“Compound is Found to Fight Cancers,” 1987). Many newspapers have published stories about individual patients and their struggles with cancer and other diseases. For example, *The Commercial Appeal* published a story about a boy who passed away, “a courageous Soviet child who fell in love with Memphis” when he came to the hospital for treatment for a rare form of cancer (Beifuss, 1991).

Indeed, ALSAC/St. Jude has received much media attention since 1962, and the vast majority of it has ranged from good to glowing. The organisation has received limited negative attention, presumably because of its outstanding reputation and the relationships cultivated with media, donors, and other publics. Former CEO Shadyac (personal communication, February 23, 2006) said that sometimes newspapers printed something negative about board members, but eventually the problem would go away with no long-term negative effects. The continued success of ALSAC/St. Jude and the amount of positive media coverage over the years, in contrast to very few negative news articles, seems to reinforce this statement.

In 1986, *Crain's Chicago Business* published one such article in its opinion section. A letter written by Ken Johnson attacked board member Albert Joseph and Thomas: “Mr. Joseph is chairman of the board of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, and as far as we are concerned, no more of our money will go to St. Jude's or Danny Thomas—the grinning, cigar-smoking bastard who makes such a fine

impression whenever we have a telethon” (Johnson, 1986).

The Minneapolis *Star-Tribune* published a story about The Charities Review Council of Minnesota criticising St. Jude for not meeting its fundraising standards of spending at least 70 percent of its income on programmes and services (Franklin, 1991). According to the article, the council said the organisation was building a \$174 million surplus and not informing donors about the construction of several buildings. The council said: “Fundraising letters stress the urgency of children's needs, and do not indicate that a significant portion of donations may in fact be used to meet current and future construction costs.” St. Jude representatives countered the attack by stating: “We're certainly not trying to dodge the issue that some of the money's going for construction.” The article notes that the hospital had “used current funds to build a central energy plant, parking garage, and five-story research tower that will double research space.” The St. Jude representative added that the buildings “should hasten breakthroughs in brain tumor and bone marrow research” (Franklin, 1991).

Parham, (personal communication, February 21, 2006) former ALSAC/St. Jude director of communications who now works as the volunteer archivist, noted: “Danny used to get the hospital in trouble in the early years because he tended to exaggerate and once in a while he would make a claim, such as St. Jude curing leukemia in 1964 when the hospital had merely announced that leukemia could no longer be considered incurable.” This incident demonstrates the difficulties of involving celebrities and other influential stakeholders in communication efforts; organisations risk losing control of the message. However, Parham (personal communication, February 21, 2006) also stressed the value of a celebrity like Thomas, who was popular among media and extremely dedicated to the cause: “Danny was a national celebrity, but the media interest was in him as an entertainer, even though he managed to work in mention of St. Jude in almost every interview he had.” Shadyac (personal

communication, February 23, 2006) echoed this sentiment: “ALSAC was not meant to be in the paper. We never sought media attention... Danny loved the media and they loved him.”

Whatever the reason, Thomas and ALSAC/St. Jude continued to receive mostly positive media attention. *The Saturday Evening Post* ran a four-page feature story titled, “St. Jude's Hospital: This is the House that Danny Built” (Miller, 1979, p. 78). The article's introduction states: “Young patients have a hard time deciding which one is the patron saint of the hopeless—St. Jude or Danny Thomas. But everyone agrees they make a terrific team” (Miller, 1979, p. 78). The article tells the story of the struggling actor, his hard work to make the hospital a reality, and reveals Thomas' humble charm: “For some reason, people always listened when I talked and believed what I said. I think that's why St. Jude's was built the way it was. There's nothing phony about it” (Miller, 1979, p. 81).

*People* magazine published a feature story the same year. The article titled, “St. Jude Children's Hospital was Danny Thomas' Dream, but Dr. Alvin Mauer Makes it Come True,” describes Thomas and Dr. Mauer as “a peculiar collaboration of showbiz and Middle America” (Sanderson, 1979, p. 107). Thomas recognised Mauer's “genius,” and the doctor responded: “The evolution of one man's idea into what this hospital has become is the real miracle” (Sanderson, 1979, p. 108).

### **Accolades for Thomas**

It is evident that Thomas' relationship with ALSAC/St. Jude went beyond that of most celebrities and non-profit organisations. Indeed, Thomas was recognised for his charitable work by more than just the media. As early as 1963, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy honoured Thomas in Washington, with the ‘Big Brother of the Year’ award (“Danny Thomas Honored,” 1963). In 1966, the city of Memphis named a street near the hospital Danny Thomas Boulevard (Meeks, 1990). And in 1985, President Ronald Reagan presented Thomas with a Congressional Gold Medal for his humanitarian efforts (Radcliffe, 1985).

In January 1991, G.P. Putnam's Sons published Thomas' autobiography, 'Make Room for Danny'. *The San Francisco Chronicle* called the new book a "good-natured, occasionally hokey memoir" about "the quintessential Hollywood good guy," an image that helped build ALSAC/St. Jude's positive reputation (Thompson, 1991). The book is filled with stories from his youth and "dozens of anecdotes about Hollywood legends," but Thomas makes it clear that he is most proud of his work with ALSAC/St. Jude (Thompson, 1991).

Thomas travelled to Memphis the first week of February 1991 to promote his book, signing copies at local bookstores for two days. A reporter from *The Commercial Appeal* interviewed the 77-year-old author, who reaffirmed his 'good guy' image and confirmed the 'straight' reputation of the book: "There isn't anything sensational to reveal. I didn't have to avoid anything" (Koeppel, 1991a). Thomas said he had been asked to write about himself 18 years ago, "but I'm a big procrastinator. Anyway, I'm still living my life. I never thought I was a book" (Koeppel, 1991a).

One day after the Memphis book signings, on February 7, 1991, Thomas died from a heart attack in his Beverly Hills home. Newspaper accounts of the tragedy said Thomas was "meeting people, shaking hands, laughing and joking" during the book signings, but "several people who saw him indicate he grew tired during his stay and may not have felt well" (Koeppel, 1991b). Apparently Thomas told one of the store managers that he hadn't slept the night before. She said: "He was very gracious, very open and friendly, but I could tell he didn't feel well" (Koeppel, 1991b).

### **Thomas' legacy continues**

Newspapers across the country wrote about Thomas' death, quoting friends' and celebrities' memories of Thomas. Carl Reiner, who co-produced *The Dick Van Dyke Show* with Thomas, remembered him as the most alive man he ever met. "You'd just walk up to

him and there would be energy coming out from him. He exuded love," Reiner said (McDonnel, 1991).

*The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* quoted Thomas' agent: "It's hard to believe. He really wasn't sick." This article, like many others published at the time, told Thomas' life story, combining his hard-earned Hollywood career with his softer side, the legend of St. Jude. A local businessman, who was Thomas' oldest friend in St. Louis, said: "Talk about a guy who had deep feelings, he had them. He really cared about people. Sometimes his warmth made him appear like a man of the cloth" ("Danny Thomas Tempered Comedy with Warmth, 1991). Similarly, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* called Thomas, "an industry power for nearly three decades," adding that Thomas "would have wanted to be remembered for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, which he founded to the tune of uncountable millions over the years" (Kloer, 1991).

ALSAC/St. Jude's hometown newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal*, wrote more than 11 articles about Thomas shortly after his death. Memphis Mayor Dick Hackett said: "Danny's commitment and vision have been a blessing to this world and to Memphis" (Beifuss & Markon, 1991). He stated that the city's flags would be flown at half-staff for the rest of the month in honour of Thomas. A Tennessee politician added: "The entire world has lost a good servant" (Beifuss & Markon, 1991). *The Commercial Appeal* covered Thomas' funerals in both California and Memphis. About the California service, the paper stated: "The world outside Memphis will pay final tribute today to Danny Thomas, the entertainer who was as beloved for his humanitarian efforts as for his ability to make people laugh" (Beifuss, 1991b). Former presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford attended the California service, along with Bob Hope and Milton Berle. Hope said: "He didn't just wish for things to be better and brighter, he went out and made them that way. Danny's in heaven now, with St. Jude and Jack Benny, Bing (Crosby) and Lucille Ball, and Sammy (Davis). I have it on good authority God said, 'Move over, and make room for Danny'" (Beifuss, 1991c).

Perhaps borrowing Bob Hope's published quote, a number of newspaper cartoonists also paid tribute to Thomas after his death. Although they were from different cities and states, nearly all of the cartoons depicted the same theme: an angel yelling toward the gates of heaven, "MAKE ROOM FOR DANNY!" The hospital framed seven of the cartoons and hung them on a wall in the hospital, where they remain today (ALSAC/St. Jude, n.d.c.).

At his request, Thomas was buried in a crypt in a garden just outside of St. Jude (Risher, 1991). The hospital had lost its founder and most visible fundraiser, but it had to continue its mission. *The Commercial Appeal* wrote about this dilemma in an article in which hospital director Dr. Joseph Simone said: "You can't replace the founder, but his family, the hospital and ALSAC have quietly recognised that he wouldn't live forever, and plans were put in effect in the last 15 years. We are as prepared as we can be" (Powers, 1991). Parham, who is also quoted in the article, said the hospital expected to raise more than \$90 million that year to help "pay for part of a continuing \$125 million expansion that will more than double the hospital's size" (Powers, 1991). Dr. Simone said the hospital is financially secure because ALSAC/St. Jude staff had cultivated relationships with "smaller donors" (Powers, 1991).

At the time of Thomas' death, Parham said: "I don't think his death will have an adverse affect. Immediately we will probably see an increase through our memorial program" (Powers, 1991). And he was right. In an email interview, Parham described 'Operation Going Home', which he had written in 1990 in preparation for Thomas' death, whenever it might happen. The plan included prepared news releases and other media relations support. He said the organisation, "immediately added a tag to the television special so that the show could still be used with Danny doing his pitches. We sent out a special mailing to our direct mail list. We then made a special appeal to all donors asking them to remember Danny with

a special gift in his memory" (P. Parham, personal communication, February 21, 2006).

After his death, Thomas' legacy lived on through long-established events and relationships managed by ALSAC/St. Jude staff, board members, loyal donors, and volunteers. But, of course, Thomas would be missed. Parham was quoted in an article after Thomas death: "Unlike other celebrities that just lent their names to an institution, (Thomas) took a direct personal interest in our activities. We worked for him" (Powers, 1991). Parham (personal communication, February 21, 2006) wrote about Thomas: "His passion for St. Jude came through in every speech he gave to ALSAC conventions, Syrian Lebanese Club regional conventions, every town, small and large where he went to promote St. Jude."

### **A new beginning for ALSAC/St. Jude**

The organisation had to move on, and in the summer of 1991, newspapers began publishing rumours about the possibility of Marlo Thomas taking over her father's role. At the time, Marlo was known for her abortion rights and feminist activism, among other things. An *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article had the headline, "Is Marlo too controversial to follow Danny's act at St. Jude?" (Smith, 1991). In another article, St. Jude Board Chairman Albert Joseph said: "Marlo is, without question, our choice as a major spokesman for St. Jude. She is emerging by the growth in her own interest." He added: "No one will do what Danny did. I don't think the public understands that Danny gave St. Jude about 75 percent of his time during the last 15 years of his life" (Powers, 1991b). ALSAC surveyed journalists and conducted focus groups across the country and received positive feedback about Marlo (R. Shadyac, personal communication, February 23, 2006). Thus, Marlo Thomas took over her father's role as the famous face of ALSAC/St. Jude.

As the founder of ALSAC/St. Jude, Thomas was the first and most prominent in a long line of celebrities who have donated their money, time and talents to the non-profit organisation. The Thomas family, including Marlo,

ALSAC/St. Jude staff, and loyal stakeholders, such as long-time board members, donors and volunteers, help maintain relationships with celebrities and other publics today. For instance, in 2004, Marlo and her brother and sister, Tony and Terre Thomas, created the Thanks & Giving Campaign (2009) to raise funds during the holidays. During the campaign, ALSAC/St. Jude staff manage relationships with corporate partners such as Target, Williams-Sonoma, and Kay Jewelers. The campaign is promoted through television spots featuring celebrities such as Jennifer Aniston, Robin Williams, and Antonio Banderas (Thanks & Giving Campaign, 2009).

Celebrity support for ALSAC/St. Jude continues today. In recent years, the St. Jude Hollywood Gala and other events managed by ALSAC/St. Jude staff have hosted countless celebrities, including Holly Hunter, Geena Davis, Barbara Hershey, Bette Midler, and Gary Oldman. Gala entertainment has included performances from Sheryl Crowe, Melissa Etheridge, Whitney Houston, Natalie Cole, James Taylor, Marc Anthony, and Ray Romano. Other celebrities, including Jim Carey, Danny Devito, and Dennis Quaid, have visited the hospital in person to show their support (ALSAC/St. Jude, n.d.d).

It is clear that Thomas laid the foundation for ALSAC/St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and its continued success. The organisation's first annual report lists "gifts received" of almost \$160,000 (Jones, 1996, p. 30). The 1991 annual report lists total revenues of more than \$104 million, a reflection of the organisation's immense growth during its first 30 years (ALSAC/St. Jude, 1991). Since 1962, the hospital has saved thousands of lives through treatment and research. Children with paediatric cancers and other illnesses have a much higher chance of surviving today, thanks in part to the work of Thomas and ALSAC/St. Jude (Jones, 1996).

Public relations and fundraising practitioners and scholars can learn a great deal about relationship management from the example of Thomas and ALSAC/St. Jude.

Thomas' early promise to St. Jude was the impetus for the creation of the non-profit organisation, and he used everything he had—heritage, celebrity, labour, love and faith—to make ALSAC/St. Jude a reality. Thomas worked tirelessly to promote his cause and communicate the hospital's message from 1962 to 1991, and countless others have continued his work.

Indeed, the hospital has succeeded because of the foundation and relationships that Thomas built, and it continues to thrive today thanks to stewardship and cultivation of those relationships, not only by ALSAC/St. Jude staff, but also by other loyal stakeholders. This case study demonstrates the importance of stewardship and its four components—reciprocity, responsibility, reporting, and relationship nurturing—in non-profit relationship building among practitioners, celebrities, board members, media, donors, and volunteers. While limited in scope, it is hoped that this case study adds a unique, historical perspective to current literature, and that future studies will continue to build on these important aspects of non-profit public relations, fundraising, and relationship management research.

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