

Elon Medallion

Thomas C. Barnett

A talented, determined, and extraordinarily bright young man, Thomas Barnett is an outstanding Honors Fellow and, as he deals daily with physical challenges, a model of courage for the entire Elon campus community.

Thomas considers himself fortunate to have spent his formative years in a rich “academic universe” comprising two well-educated parents, a self-described “addiction” to educational and science-related TV, and one of the best school systems in the nation, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City School District. Dick Hill, a freelance graphic designer, became Thomas’s mentor during high school, and Thomas realized he possessed the creative and intellectual potential to succeed in the field of graphic design. Choosing to continue his formal education at Elon University, Thomas matriculated in August 2003 and moved into the William R. Kenan, Jr. Honors Pavilion, a living-learning community dedicated to shared academic purpose.

Blessed with a brilliant mind, a near-photographic memory, and superb writing skills, Thomas could be successful in any number of fields. However, he continued to pursue his dream of a career as a graphic designer and elected to major in digital art. The faculty of the Elon art department variously describe Thomas as “phenomenal”, “meticulous”, and “relentless,” setting high standards for himself and insisting that his artistic vision be represented exactly. He produces excellent work. His charcoal and chalk self-portrait won an Award of Excellence in the 2005 Shifting Gears juried exhibition for young artists with disabilities. His Elon mentor, L.M. Wood, calls Thomas a major presence in the art department. A Dean’s List and Presentent’s List student, Thomas offers his classmates helpful and incisive feedback. He is a leading supporter of the arts on campus, attending as many events and exhibitions as possible.

His friends comment on Thomas’s fierce independence, his unblinking honesty, and his dry sense of humor. He is also known for his passion for films and his love of chocolate. A painstaking planner, Thomas surmounted numerous obstacles and spent the fall 2005 semester studying at the University of Curtin in Perth, Australia.

Thomas is a leader in the campaign for public accessibility awareness. He served as technical advisor to the University of North Carolina ACCESS Project, an assessment of wheelchair accessibility on the sixteen UNC campuses. Dr. Rachel Willis, Bowman and Gray Distinguished Associate Professor of American Studies and Economics at UNC-Chapel Hill and project co-creator, says Thomas also volunteered to create a Web site to heighten public awareness of accessibility issues. She writes that Thomas created “a Web site that not only met new international design standards of accessibility for users with visual and/or learning disabilities, but also linked users to sites [that would help them] understand and use those standards in their own site construction.” The Web site “has moved the project from public service to the realm of engaged scholarship; it

enables others to build upon the work because of its comprehensive public documentation. Thomas has set a benchmark for professional engaged scholarship and public service that few will ever reach.”

Providing similar advocacy at Elon, Thomas has reminded the University of its responsibility to make the campus accessible to everyone. When the Elon art department moved to a new campus facility last year, Thomas carefully examined the route to the building, documenting physical barriers that would impede those with limited mobility. This summer an elevator will be installed in Alamance, one of the oldest buildings on campus. Insisting that others see the physical world from his vantage point, Thomas has caused Elon University and the Town of Elon to examine accessibility issues seriously and work to accommodate special needs.

Thomas is a member of the first Elon Honors Fellows cohort required to write theses as part of the honors program. Thomas proposed that his thesis, titled Public Accessibility Awareness Imagery Project, would “challenge and expose the reality of America’s ‘commitment’ to public accessibility.” He intended to raise awareness by creating and exhibiting photographs documenting accessibility issues in the local community. Thomas’s activist documentary art project is in the historic tradition of artists who use their work to highlight and expose social injustices.

Thomas’s advocacy benefits countless persons facing physical challenges—as well as, as he rightly observes, “all persons of any ability.” In recognition of his extraordinary achievements and his loyalty and meritorious service to Elon University, Thomas C. Barnett, Class of 2007, is hereby awarded the Elon Medallion this 18th day of May, 2007.

Leo M. Lambert
President