HOME

THE SOUL OF LEBANON



Marlo Thomas

THE LEBANESE-AMERICAN MEGASTAR BEHIND
ST. JUDE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH HOSPITAL

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Lebanese-American, father-daughter TV stars Danny and Marlo Thomas are among the most famous Americans of all time. Yet, they are perhaps most remembered for their leading roles at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.



Actress, author, feminist, humanitarian and philanthropist Marlo Thomas has received numerous awards, including a Grammy, four Emmys and a Golden Globe. But in 2014, when United States President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor an American civilian can receive, tears swelled in her eyes. President Obama quoted her father Danny Thomas, saying, "There are two types of people in the world: givers and takers. The takers sometimes eat better, but the givers always sleep better."

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"At that moment, I couldn't help but think about my father and my immigrant Lebanese grandparents, and how proud they would be that their granddaughter was receiving this recognition from the president of the country that had opened its arms to them when they first arrived here."

Prime time TV superstars Marlo Thomas and her father Danny were household names throughout America for decades. But it was Danny's work to establish St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and Marlo's to sustain it for which, many say, they will always be remembered.

Marlo has been the hospital spokesperson since 1991 and today serves as St. Jude's national outreach director. She heads the fundraising efforts of a hospital established mainly with the support of her father and the Lebanese-American community. Today she is known as "the heart of St. Jude."

Shortly after Danny Thomas died in 1991, Marlo visited the hospital her father established – St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. Even though her father told his children the work of the hospital would not be their burden to carry after he was gone, she wanted the hospital administration to know she and her siblings would be there to support the institution if they were needed, she recently told HOME.

"When I got to the driveway, with the 15-foot statue of St. Jude standing tall at the entrance, I sat in the car, immobilized. I didn't want to go inside. The sadness was all too fresh.

"But I pulled myself together and went in. In the lobby, a party was going on. There was ice cream and cake. Confetti. Balloons. Happy little children running around in party hats.

"'Whose birthday is it?'" I asked the nurse.

"'Oh, it's not a birthday party,' she said. 'It's an off-chemo party.'

"I had never seen anything like this. All these little children were celebrating one child's turn for the better, with their parents and grandparents standing by with tears in their eyes. If this child could make it, maybe their beloved child would, too.

"In that moment, I breathed in what my father had been holding in his heart for so many years. I had walked into a place where hope lived. A place families had traveled to from all over the country, terrified, carrying death sentences for their babies. And I knew that my father's spirit would always live there."

"I had walked into a place where hope lived.

"And I fell in love with this wonderful place," said Thomas. "These children have changed my life. In their little faces, I have seen such courage, strength and compassion, and an unbelievable capacity for joy in the face of such adversity.

"I've gotten to know them and their families, just as my father had. I've been to their graduations and their weddings, and even their funerals. I have held a dying child in my arms and said 'goodbye.' I never thought I could bear such a thing. But I have."

Born into American television royalty; becoming her own woman
Practically every American with a television in the 1950s and '60s saw Danny Thomas' shows *Make Room for Daddy* and *The Danny Thomas Show.* He was also a regular on the talk show circuit and an acclaimed comedian in nightclubs for most of his 60-year career. And he distinguished himself as a producer.

Legendary star Bob Hope told The New York Times Danny Thomas was "one of the giants" of the entertainment industry.

"My father used to take me to work with him when I was little – to movie sets and TV studios – and I fell head-over-heels in love with what he was doing," said Thomas.

"As I got older, it really began to look like I would pursue the same career.

But that didn't sit well with my dad. He constantly warned me how difficult the business was. But he knew I wasn't listening."

Still, Marlo did as her father wished and went to college, something neither of her parents did. "Getting my degree meant everything to them," she said.

The day she graduated from the University of Southern California as an English teacher, she handed her father the diploma and said, "This is for you, Dad. Now I'm going to New York to study acting."

"A new generation of women who dreamed of being "somebody," not just "somebody's wife."

After a successful stage debut, Thomas became *That Girl* (in an ABC sitcom of that name) to a new generation of women who dreamed of being "somebody," not just "somebody's wife." It told the story of Ann Marie, one of the first female TV characters who was single, living alone and pursuing her career.

From the very first episode in 1966, the show tapped into what was just becoming the women's movement. It led the way for other strong female TV protagonists that followed.

After a five-year run, in its final episode, the show's sponsors thought Marlo's character, Ann Marie, should marry her long-time boyfriend Donald and live happily ever after. Thomas resisted and instead Ann Marie took Donald to a woman's liberation meeting, popular in the 1960s and '70s, where discussions focused on reproductive rights, equal pay and other issues of importance to women.

Beyond her iconic TV role, Marlo became a major player in her own right. She became a TV megastar, performed on and off Broadway from 1974 until 2016 – so far, and was the second woman ever, after Lucille Ball, to produce her own TV series.

From 1996 to 2002, Thomas played Jennifer Aniston's mother on the TV series *Friends*. She is also a best-selling author of six books, with the book and album sets *Free to Be… You and Me* and *Free to Be… a Family* being cultural game-changers.

A passionate feminist, Thomas joined Gloria Steinem, Letty Cottin Pogrebin and Patricia Carbine in 1973 to found the Ms. Foundation for Women with the mission to "build women's collective power to realize a nation of justice for all." She attributes her feminism to her mother, who gave up her singing career to be a wife and mother. Thomas felt her mother sacrificed too much. "She gave her whole life to us," Thomas told Barbara Walters in a 1992 Lifetime interview. "I'm guilty about it. I feel we could have made it on half her life."

Not one to rest on her laurels, at 79, Thomas designed and launched a clothing line in 2017 that was sold on "Home Shopping Network." With a nod to *That Girl*, she named her collection *That Woman*.

Remembering Danny Thomas through Marlo's eyes
Danny Thomas's father came from Dair al-Ahmar, near Baalbek and his mother from Bcharre. He was born in Deerfield, Michigan, in 1912, and grew up in Toledo, Ohio, with eight brothers and one sister. He dropped out of high school in his freshman year with a dream to make it big in show business, which he, of course, did in a very big way.

"A lot of people don't know this about my father, but for all his success and fame, he was still – at his core – a working class guy who was incredibly


Marlo Thomas as her iconic TV character Ann Marie in *That Girl*


Marlo and Danny Thomas visiting a patient at St. Jude Hospital

devoted to his family. Daddy genuinely enjoyed the company of his children. He was big on hugging and kissing and he could be very emotional," Marlo said.

"Sometimes he went overboard," she recalled. "When I was at USC and I got a 3.8 average, he was so proud, he took my report card on *The Tonight Show* and boasted to Johnny Carson, 'This is my kid – 3.8!" I have to talk to her through an interpreter!' And then there was the time he told Carson (and the rest of America) I had just gotten my first bra. The audience howled. I was afraid to go to school for a week.

"But what I remember most about my father was his soul-deep decency. I constantly saw his compassion on display in so many settings.

"I remember once riding in the car with him when I was around 7 or 8. We passed a bunch of boys beating up on another little boy. Dad slammed on the brakes and got out of the car. I saw him pull the boys apart and give them a talking to. Then we drove home the kid who had been beaten up. After we dropped him off, Dad drove in silence for a while, and then said, almost to himself, 'I hate a bully.'

"And it tells you everything you need to know about why he cared so much about sick children. I think he saw cancer in kids as a bully."

St. Jude was a constant topic of conversation in the Thomas HOME.

In serious moments, their father would talk about what had driven him to build St. Jude. "Those stories always led back to his own childhood, as the son of Lebanese immigrants in Toledo, Ohio – a place where no one ever went to a doctor. His mother gave birth at HOME to all 10 of her babies with nothing but her sister and a lot of hot water.

"He witnessed firsthand the inequity of poor healthcare and he never forgot it – the sight of little white coffins being carried to the cathedral at the end of the street. Children in his neighborhood died of things like influenza and appendicitis.

"That's what inspired him to create a hospital for the sickest of children – where moms and dads and desperately ill kids would travel to from around the world, and where no family would pay for their child's treatment.

"He never tired of raising funds for the hospital. When I became *That Girl* on television, he called me his 'bonus kid,' because whenever he was unable to attend a St. Jude event, he'd send me to take his place. At Phil's and my wedding (Thomas married popular TV talk show host Phil

Photos from the private collection of Marlo Thomas

"As her father did, Marlo vowed to be "a proud beggar for the sickest of children."


Danny Thomas and Marlo Thomas at the entrance of St. Jude Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.A.


Actresses Jennifer Aniston and Marlo Thomas. Thomas played Aniston's mother on *Friends*.

Donahue), Dad clinked his glass and said, 'Today, I haven't lost a daughter. I've gained a fundraiser.' Everyone laughed. But he wasn't kidding."

The story behind St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

You might say Marlo Thomas' birth spurred the founding of St. Jude. When she was born in Detroit, Danny and his wife Rose Marie couldn't pay the medical expenses. Until Danny could provide $75, mother and baby had to stay in the hospital, Marlo's sister Terre told The Michigan Catholic.

Thomas stopped in a church to pray to St. Jude, the patron of lost causes. "In his pocket, Danny had $7. In a leap of faith, he put it all in the poor box and said to St. Jude, 'I need that back 10 times tomorrow!'"

That was Sunday. Monday, Danny received a call about a radio opportunity that paid $75 cash. He vowed he'd establish a shrine to St. Jude and he made good on it when he, with the help of Dr. Lemuel Diggs and Anthony Abraham, established St. Jude Hospital in 1962.

Marlo, along with her sister Terre and brother Tony, has been leading the fundraising efforts. Every November, their "Thanks and Giving" campaign encourages holiday shoppers to 'give thanks for the healthy children in their life, and give to those who are not,'" she said. Because Danny Thomas wished that no child would be turned away if a family couldn't pay, fundraising has always been critical.

"The average hospital only needs to get 8% of its money from fundraising, Marlo explained, "but because we're a non-profit — and families at St. Jude don't pay for anything — we must raise 75 percent of our funds from the public. It now costs one billion dollars a year to run the hospital, so that's what we must raise. And so like my dad, I'm part of a team that criss-crosses the country as proud beggars on behalf of the sickest of children. Fundraising is the key to our very survival."

In 2014, St. Jude opened its Marlo Thomas Center for Global Education and Collaboration, which provides a medical library and facilities to support research. And it shares discoveries with the global research community to speed progress in the fight against childhood cancer and other catastrophic diseases.


At the 2014 opening of the Marlo Thomas Center for Global Education and Collaboration.


United States President Barack Obama awarded Marlo Thomas the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2014.

For many Lebanese-Americans, her father Danny is the source of their Lebanese pride, she noted. "I was once in West Hollywood years ago, dashing down Sunset Boulevard to pick up a book I'd ordered, and I was running late. One block before I reached the bookstore, I passed a gift shop. As I darted past it, I glanced quickly at the window display. I stopped dead in my tracks. There in the middle – among the knick-knacks and curios – was a framed photograph of my father.

"I rushed into the store and yelled to the elderly man behind the counter, 'Why do you have a photograph of Danny Thomas in your window?'

"'Because I'm Lebanese!' the shopkeeper proudly shouted."

The Honorable Edward M. Gabriel, president of the American Task Force for Lebanon and former U.S. ambassador to Morocco, recently told HOME that in the 1950s, when *The Danny Thomas Show* became the most popular thing on television, his generation of Lebanese-Americans "became Lebanese with that show." Before that, they thought of themselves as Arab or Syrian.

"It's interesting – of all the wonderful things written about my father – the most unexplored aspect of his life was that his parents were Lebanese immigrants to America. Of course, his fans knew he was Lebanese. But few beyond his family and close friends know the depth of the meaning to my father of his Lebanese heritage, the many ways it shaped his life, and how much his pride in that meant to the American-Lebanese people."

By Sandra Whitehead

"Why do you have a photograph of Danny Thomas in your window?

Because I'm Lebanese! the shopkeeper proudly shouted.

On being Lebanese-American

"We're a passionate people," Thomas said of the Lebanese, "whether it's in our careers or our marriages or simply the way we face life with fire and strength and a deep love and loyalty to family. I think all in my family fit that model.

"It's also frequently said the Lebanese have a fierce allegiance to each other. St. Jude was founded and funded by men and women of Lebanese descent, and that still holds today, as second and third generations of the founding families continue to hold seats on the St. Jude board. That bond – that powerful brother- and sisterhood among Lebanese members – gives me such a deep sense of pride and belonging."

DANNY THOMAS FULFILLS HIS FATHER'S WISH: "DON'T FORGET THE HOMELAND."


At a reception in honor of Danny Thomas. From left to right: MP Emile Boustani, Danny Thomas, U.S. Ambassador HE Armin H. Meyer, Charles Helou (Lebanon's next president), and Lebanese ambassador to the United States Ibrahim Al-Andab.

Photo from An-Nahar

Excerpts from a dispatch from the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon to the U.S. State Department, May 8, 1962

The visit of Danny Thomas, American TV star, and his charming wife Rose Marie, to Lebanon as guests of the Lebanese Government from April 26 to May 3 was an unqualified success.

During his brief visit to Lebanon, TV star Danny Thomas by his warmth, cheerfulness and patience throughout an exhausting round of activities won the hearts of the Lebanese, who in turn captured his. The appearance of the 50-year-old Thomas in the HOMEland of his parents for the first time provided the framework for many heartfelt demonstrations of Lebanese-American friendship.

The keynote for the visit was set by Thomas himself, when at a riotous welcome at the airport, he emphasized his father's wish shortly before his death: "My son, I have only one wish to leave with you before I pass away – don't forget the HOMEland."

Some 50 members of the Thomas clan were among those to greet him at the airport, amid much rivalry and pushing to have the honor of welcoming him with hugs and kisses. There were at least nine fist fights among those contending for a spot in front.

Among those on hand were Deputy Emile Boustani, Deputy Habib Kairouz of Bcharre, the HOME village of Danny's mother, and representatives of the Foreign Ministry and the Embassy.

Throughout the week, papers continued to follow Danny's activities with interest: his visits to the ailing Maronite Patriarch Meouchi; to the American University of Beirut; to the HOMEtown of his father at Deir al-Ahmar, near Baalbek; to his mother's birthplace at Bcharre in the Qadisha Valley, where an estimated 12,000 people gathered to greet him; his call on President Chehab; and large receptions, lunches and dinners in his honor. Thomas was awarded the Lebanese "Order of the Cedars."

It was evident that the Lebanese are proud of this emigrant son who has made good and who has done good by such charitable undertakings as the St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis to aid leukemia-stricken children.

At the Information Minister's luncheon, Thomas again touched the heartstrings of the Lebanese when he mentioned his father's wish to be buried in Lebanon, but said he and his siblings preferred him close so they could visit him.

Marcel Khalife Remembers

Marcel Khalife remembers a special moment in 1962. As a student in the Conservatoire Libanais, Khalife was invited to the Casino Du Liban where he played the oud to accompany Danny Thomas singing a *mawal ataba* (a traditional style of Lebanese music).

https://forwomen.org/
https://www.stjude.org/about-st-jude/leadership/boards-of-directors-and-governors.html
https://www.stjude.org/get-involved/other-ways/st-jude-thanks-and-giving.html

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