

## 'Life as a Tall Girl' takes on a life of its own

by Contributor - Thursday, April 03, 2008

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/687/life-as-a-tall-girl-takes-on-a-life-of-its-own/>

[Click here to watch Becky Thomas on the Today Show.](#)

Becky Thomas has been gawked at throughout her life. At 5-foot-10 in the fourth grade, Thomas was labeled the “Jolly Green Giant” by her peers. Incredibly shy and from Mineral Point, Wis., a small town of about 2,600, Thomas felt forced into the spotlight wherever she went. But today at 6 feet, 4 inches tall, she has a reason to stand proud.

“Life as a Tall Girl,” a personal essay she wrote for her feature writing class, has gained national exposure. First published on the New York Times’ Web site last week, it caught the attention of not only men and women of all heights, but of NBC’s The Today Show, which will feature Thomas live on April 9.

The Today Show crew followed Thomas around UW Oshkosh on Tuesday and will fly her out to New York for a program on how height affects people’s lives.

“I’m a little bit nervous [to go on TV],” said Thomas. “Just thinking about it, my old self came back [and said], ‘you’re going to look so tall compared to everyone else.’ But I’m excited to stand up and say this is who I am and I’m proud of it.”

Her height, however, hasn’t always been a point of pride. Her essay describes how being taller than most men and women has been a challenge – from finding clothes that fit to not even kissing a man until college.

“Everybody has some sort of body image problem whether you’re a man or woman, shorter or tall, there’s always something you don’t like about yourself,” Thomas said. “All the products out there to improve your appearance in the end – those things aren’t going to make you happy. You have to embrace who you are.”

Becoming comfortable with her height was a slow process, and she still has moments where she wishes she was shorter. People often approach her at the mall or in restaurants only to talk about her height, and sometimes she hears bystanders whispering about her as though she can’t hear.

“You can’t be rude to people,” Thomas said. “They’re just curious ... usually people are really nice.”

Thomas will be part of a Today Show segment on extreme heights. Nick Palladino, associate producer, said a Today Show staff member pitched the idea after writing a column for a men’s magazine about the difficulties of being a 5-foot-4 male. The producers wanted to find a taller than average female, and someone recommended Thomas after reading her essay on the Times “Well” blog.

“For us, she came along at the right time,” Palladino said. “She was really articulate and interesting, from talking about intimidating men to dealing with strangers to difficulty in buying clothes.”

On April 1, the Today Show crew followed her to class, to track practice, shopping and at her apartment.

“It’s surprising what people take for granted,” Palladino said. “She’s not enormous, she’s not 7 feet tall, but just because she’s taller than average, [her life is different from many others].”

“Life as a Tall Girl” was published March 24 after journalism adjunct professor Grace Lim shared the essay with Times health columnist Tara Parker-Pope, a longtime friend who writes the “Well” blog. Parker-Pope said that when she read Thomas’ piece, she “knew immediately it would be a hit with readers” and wanted to publish it as a guest column.

With more than 450 comments on the essay, many people shared praise as well as their own stories. Responses ran the gamut, with insight from men and women of all ages and sizes: tall women with shorter husbands, men who are attracted to tall women, and men and women wishing they had extra height. There was also a comment by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jane Smiley (comment No. 200), who stands at 6 feet 2 inches.

A teenager named Kate (comment No. 440) shared her frustration: “That is so great to me that you wrote this! I am an early teen who is 5’ 11” 1/2. I get so many stares ... So many people think others haven’t commented on my height, and it bugs me so much!”

In another comment, Janine (comment No. 339) said remarks about her height never stop. “Just last night a woman came up to me and commented how unusual it was for her to run into a woman taller than her — and I’m only 6’ tall!” she said. She added, “I’m married to a 5’7” man. He thinks we’re the same height. We joke that he has a 45-degree ego! It works just fine.”

To have this many comments on a post is unusual, Parker-Pope said. The essay is currently the seventh most-commented-on post since she started the blog last fall, and Parker-Pope said she expects it will be “one of the most talked about” entries of the year.

“While Becky’s essay was about being tall, it tapped into this universal theme about feeling comfortable in your own body and feeling good about yourself no matter what size or shape you are,” Parker-Pope said. “Self-esteem and body image are issues that come up time and time again when writing about health.”

Initially, Thomas wrote an essay for class describing how busy she was as a student juggling multiple jobs, classes and sports. Lim called the original idea a “non-story,” and before telling Thomas to come up with something else, asked her the irksome question: “How tall are you?”

“She visibly slumped and said, ‘6-4,’” Lim recalled. “I then said, ‘How many times a day do people ask you that question?’ She responded, ‘Too many times.’”

That’s how Thomas began writing a true personal essay, chronicling how her parents and doctors worried about the cause of her extreme height to enduring childhood teasing to gaining more confidence in

running track.

“Society keeps me aware of my status as a rarity ... there are times when I would trade in my long legs for a petite frame and tiny feet,” Thomas says in her essay.

Lim tells students that personal essays must have a message for readers. “Becky’s take-away was this: love who you are. What’s not to love about that?” the Oshkosh instructor said.

From now on, Lim said, Thomas’ essay will be used as a standard for students to reach.

“Seriously, I feel like a proud parent,” she said. “There is nothing cooler for a teacher than to see a student succeed in the professional world. Getting published in the New York Times? It doesn’t get any bigger than that.”

UW Oshkosh Chancellor Richard Wells said not only has Thomas’ essay “touched a nerve,” it’s also a positive presentation of an instructor working closely with a student, promoting her work beyond the university setting.

“This is absolutely fabulous,” Wells said. “She’s really touched on a thoughtful topic in a clear way and it generated such a positive response. What more could a writer want?”

After graduating with journalism and English degrees in December, Thomas said she plans to write in some form, whether it’s through sports reporting, news features or fiction. She currently writes for the sports section of the student paper, the Advance-Titan.

Thomas just launched her own blog to continue the conversation on height and sharing that pride with tall women everywhere. See it at <http://tallgirlwrites.blogspot.com>.

“[Height] is something you can’t change,” Thomas said. “I spent a lot of time wishing I was something I’m not and it was just a waste of time. I wish I would’ve realized sooner, embraced it and used it to my advantage, and that goes for anybody. “No matter what, everybody has insecurities and you can only dwell on it for so long before you realize you have to move on.”

[Click here to read Thomas's essay.](#)

[Click here to watch Becky Thomas on the Today Show.](#)

*The photo above is of Becky Thomas and adjunct professor Grace Lim. Lim is 5'9". Photo by Megan Sheridan.*