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## Thomas Ted - Callison College One Pager

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Ted Thomas, Bangalore III and Kansai I

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” is the universal question that adults direct at children. It’s something of a trick question, since what they generally mean is, “How do you plan to earn your keep as an adult?” Children rarely have an idea, of course, and neither do adults, so at most it’s a good way to exercise the imagination. However, when asked to boil it all down and summarize what exactly happened at Callison College and why that experience seems to have left its mark on so many of us, I’ve come to feel that the value of a cross-cultural education is exactly that; getting a handle on what you want to be, or, more precisely, how to be. To borrow another descriptor of childhood, we play well with others, no matter what we’ve ended up doing. And that learned ability is largely because of the smallness of the school, the exposure to Western and non Western traditions, learning that there are things called tribes and getting pushed outside of ours to live and study, and learning how to think. I believe that these fundamentals are what made Callison remarkable.

For me, I was an AFS student to Brazil in high school, and had my sights on some form of international study for college. When introduced to Callison, I was all in. I was in Bangalore III, filmed some footage of my music teacher in Mysore, and then turned that into my senior project. On the basis of that, I spent the end of my senior year in Japan, with the added assignment of making a film about the Callison program there. Having graduated in absentia and still in Japan, but with no real plan to pursue filmmaking, I decided to stay until my visa ran out a year and a half later. By then I had started a documentary about a ten year-old boy living in a small town near Mt. Fuji. That film got me in the door with a producer at the Disney Studio (where my father spent his career). By the end of the 1970s I started working on films for Tokyo Disneyland and freelancing with the PBS station that produced the National Geographic Specials, which gave me the opportunity to spend an afternoon with the gorilla Koko, film Mt. Fuji at sunset from 12,000’, be the first crew since the 1950s allowed to film in Nefertari’s tomb, be berated by an Egyptian intelligence officer, “I hate the National Geographic Society!” and have grizzly bears walk within ten feet of us while they caught salmon at Alaska’s McNeil River. I took an assignment where a White House photographer and I were the only media in a room with President Reagan and Pope John Paul II before the press corps came in. I got to film extensive interviews with Apollo Astronauts who walked on the moon.

By now I was writing and directing, but I never really considered it a job, something I was reminded of by a farmer in Iowa who looked at me and my

crew and asked, “Can you actually make a living doing this?” I won a Writers Guild Award for my film on the Grizzlies, which I had seen as an anthropological tale of two species evenly matched except for technology. My script for an American Experience on the Underground Railroad was nominated for another WGA Award, as was my writing on a film about Frederick Douglass. But, as the writer Jamaica Kincaid has pointed out, “Don’t confuse honors with achievement.” I’ve worked on so many projects that have never been made... yet.

My greatest satisfaction as a storyteller has been the two feature documentaries I’ve made dealing with the golden age of animation, working with Walt Disney in his prime. Both have premises that I can trace to my Callison experiences: *Frank and Ollie* is about the lifelong friendship and collaboration of my father and his best friend, both of whom were top animators with Disney. The heart of the story is how their unique chemistry lifted each other to a level of artistry beyond what they would have achieved solo. The second, *Walt & El Grupo*, retraces a 1941 trip that Walt Disney and a select team of artists made to South American countries on the eve of US entry into World War II. At the heart of that film is the intersection of art and politics, how art is about exploring and dialog, while politics is about order and control.

In college there were faculty members who tried to steer me towards teaching. I myself sort of fancied being a musician. The two years that I spent in Japan, that was my knock-about time. The point is, becoming a visual storyteller wasn’t my goal until I sort of realized that was what I was doing. How I was doing it, a great chunk of that can be traced back to the cross-cultural education at Callison.