

# REMEMBERING AND HONORING TODD THOMAS

A behind-the-scenes champion for the industry

By Vicki Jones, Editor

**T**odd Wayne Thomas passed away on June 29, 2023, at the age of 62, after a 21-month battle with colon cancer.

Thomas devoted his life to the door and access industry, working tirelessly to make it a safer community. He served as the managing director of the Institute of Door Education and Accreditation (IDEA) from August 1998 to December 2015 and as the managing director of the International Door Association (IDA) from January 2016 to August 2017.

While many people knew Thomas, not many are fully aware of the extent to which his contributions have positively influenced the industry. D+AS interviewed some of his family members and longtime colleagues to get a broader understanding of his impact.

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## Background

Todd Wayne Thomas was born in West Palm, Fla., and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in journalism and English from Florida Southern College. He began his career working as a reporter for The Polk County Democrat newspaper and a sportswriter for the Tampa Tribune, which combined his talent for writing with his love of sports. At one point, Thomas was recruited for the Double-A minor baseball league but opted to pursue writing instead.

Early in his career, he covered President Jimmy Carter’s election campaign, the first launch of the Space Shuttle Columbia, and various business features. He was appointed to the State Emergency Response Commission and also founded a magazine about industrial safety and environmental compliance issues.

In 1985, Todd married his wife of 38 years, Cathy, and the two welcomed their first child,

Sarah, to the family in 1987. Over the next six years, they had four more daughters: Lyndsay, Emily, Victoria (Tory), and Cassandra (Sassy).

## A political run

Then, Thomas’ boss at the time, Charles Croffard Dockery, convinced him to run as a nominee for the State Legislature in the 1990 election. As an accomplished public speaker with a strong background in business and public service, he was an excellent candidate.

With the support of Dockery (a former member of the Florida Senate) and former President George Bush Sr., Thomas ended up winning the Republican primary. He was then narrowly defeated in the general election by only 714 votes.

In 1994, he relocated to North Carolina and a few years later, began working for Chris Long at Long & Associates, where he quickly transitioned into a full-time role for IDEA, developing credentialing programs for businesses and technicians in the overhead door industry.

## Key IDEA contributor

In 1996, DASMA, IDA, and ARDI (at the time) formed IDEA, a recognized certification and accreditation program focused on educating industry professionals. The IDEA Board of Directors consisted of 12 individuals (six DASMA and six IDA members). Thomas was hired as the managing director, a job he would hold for 18 years.

The IDEA members determined what content would be eligible, and Thomas would lead the development of that content. Dan Dombkowski, former colleague and longtime industry member said that Thomas was a key contributor

to IDEA from early in its inception. “Most of the original IDEA members had tons of experience in the industry either selling, installing, or manufacturing industry products,” said Dombkowski. “But they weren’t accomplished writers, and that’s where Todd shined.”

## A gifted writer

His journalism background and talented writing skills were critical to the creation of the certification curriculum. Thomas and the other board members worked together to write many of the original IDEA study guides and exams.

Once a topic was confirmed, the members would brainstorm content. Dombkowski said, “We met for four meetings a year, and then Todd and I would get with sub-committees and working groups for additional ‘work meetings’ throughout the year to expand and finalize the content.”

Thomas would interview knowledgeable people within the industry, compile their input, and then write concise content that the public

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could easily digest. “He could take 12 sentences and get it down to two without losing any context,” said Dewey Stewart, Thomas’ good friend and colleague for nearly 30 years. “It was a gift.”

Some of the diverse topics Thomas wrote about included how to install a door operator safely, insurance and regulation, managing a company’s sales and marketing, and how to run a business. “We had more of the technical cumin, and Todd was the writer,” said Dombkowski.

The speed at which he was able to create and edit content was remarkable, said Stewart. “Give him an idea and he could write a piece,

program. “Today, technicians clamor for the Master Tech certification. It recognizes a technician as having a solid and accomplished career in the industry,” said Debra Welhener, current IDEA managing director and former colleague of Thomas.

### Traveling man

Thomas administered hundreds of exams during any given year. If a door dealer called and said they were interested in a program, he would travel to their site, host an educational/training program, and administer the test.

His testing responsibilities required him to travel extensively to companies located throughout the United States and Canada. According to his colleagues, he was up for the challenge. “He knew it was for a good cause,” said Stewart. “He was very passionate about seeing the technicians get certified and raising the bar in the industry.”

Thomas’ wife Cathy confirmed that he spent at least 35 weeks out of the year traveling for the IDEA program. “He would put thousands of miles on his car, every year, just so that technicians could get certified and dealer companies could get their accreditation,” Dombkowski added.

Thomas also hosted exams at all the industry trade shows. “The first IDEA accreditation exam was

administered at the International Garage Door Exposition in Nashville, Tenn., in May 1997, and Thomas was there,” said Welhener.

## Reflections from industry professionals

“Todd was committed to making the industry a tad more organized, a lot more professional, and a ton safer. His excellent knowledge of the English language allowed him to take the often-disjunctive thoughts of the IDEA board members and convert them into coherent Study Guides. He was also a great friend, despite being a Reds fan.

— *Daniel Dombkowski, former IDEA President, DASMA Training and Education Committee Chair, and LiftMaster manager for over 38 years before retiring in 2017.*

“Todd taught me everything I know about IDEA, and we had a lot of laughs along the way.”

— *Debra Welhener, IDEA Managing Director*

“As a former IDEA director, I was fortunate to work with Todd at a young age. His enthusiasm and commitment to the industry motivated and inspired me. He was intelligent, personable, passionate, and I thank him for introducing me to sauteed mushrooms.”

— *Kevin M. Pettiette, former IDA President, and Owner of Smokey’s Garage Door*

beautifully, and in no time. It was amazing how quickly he could edit and write the study guides, especially considering that he wasn’t a door guy himself.”

### That’s a lot of content!

The number of IDEA programs created and expanded under Thomas’ leadership provides some context as to how much he contributed. During his tenure, Thomas helped write 18 study guides with an average of over 150 pages per study guide!

Thomas was also the person responsible for keeping the information current and accurate. He monitored outdated material and made sure important edits were incorporated. “For example, when one of the study guides referenced the Yellow Pages as a primary form of advertising for a dealership with absolutely no mention of the Internet, Todd managed the update,” said Dombkowski.

Thomas was also one of the masterminds behind the Master Technician certification



► In 2017, the IDEA Board members sent Todd Thomas and Dan Dombkowski to the Cincinnati Reds vs. Chicago Cubs game. Thomas was a diehard Reds fan and baseball expert.

### First industry apprenticeship program

Thomas and Stewart also headed the industry’s first apprenticeship program — a full curriculum all-around training program for technicians in the door business. “At that time, our industry wasn’t even recognized as an industry by the Federal government Department of Labor,” said Stewart. “So Todd and I went to work to get our industry recognized.”

It took three years and many visits to the Department of Labor in Illinois and Washington D.C. to finally get the apprenticeship program approved, and Thomas was instrumental in getting that done.

### Sharing his passion

Thomas was passionate about elevating the industry. He encouraged dealers to differentiate themselves from their competition by getting certified. “He believed that by accrediting companies and certifying techs we are making it safer for the public in general,” said Dombkowski.

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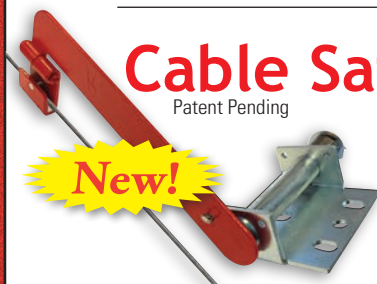
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Thomas helped boost the movement and the IDEA program overall. "We saw a significant jump in the number of technicians pursuing certifications during the 2008 downturn," said Dombkowski. And the numbers prove it.

"We went from being in the red to being in the black. Suddenly we had extra money we never had before," he added. "Thomas found ways to invest the excess funds back into the industry."

As of August 2023, IDEA has 10 certification programs and has issued over 4,500 certifications across the door, gate, and access control industry. There are also 277 active accredited companies. Thomas' work and dedication are a testament to these impressive statistics.

### Leading with purpose

Thomas would say, "I work for you, you are the bosses," and he did an excellent job organizing meetings and keeping people on track, which is hard to do when working with people from such different backgrounds, said Dombkowski. "He wasn't a demanding or authoritarian leader. He led by creative suggestion and humor."

Thomas was known as a fantastic storyteller and an all-around good person. "He treated you as a friend, not a colleague," said Stewart.

### Behind the scenes

Despite his many contributions to the door industry for nearly three decades, Thomas was never officially acknowledged with any industry awards. "I think this happens a lot when you operate in the back-ground," said Dombkowski. "Plus, Thomas was not the type to seek out recognition. He was more concerned about elevating others and making them look good."

Thomas worked as a ghost writer by writing speeches and presentations for many people in the industry. He also regularly contributed residential and commercial door-related articles to the IDA Magazine (formerly International Door and Operator Industry magazine).

He would put other people in the spotlight; for example, when the Department of Labor attended Expo to present an award recognizing the Apprenticeship Program, Thomas insisted that someone else accept the award despite his pivotal role in its development, said Stewart.

"We would not have an apprenticeship program, the Certified Door Dealer Consultant or the Automated Gate Operator Installer programs without Todd Thomas. The guy should have been on stage receiving an award every year considering everything he's done for the industry."

In 1998, Thomas was hired to do a specific job — grow the IDEA certification and accreditation program. He immediately recognized how important its success was for the industry and spent his entire career championing the cause. ■



◀ Todd with  
his wife, Cathy,  
and their five  
daughters.