



S4 | Episode Three | Small Town America

David Reyes, Recruiter, Thoma Scholarship: It's a blessing to have this many good applicants, but it's going to be hard for sure.

Jason Hale, Assistant VP of Enrollment Management: ...this program is not just providing financial support for students, but it's also creating those opportunities for students that otherwise wouldn't have an opportunity to attend Texas Tech...

Hale: Truly a scholars program that's going to change their lives.

Reyes: I'm kind of just anxious because I can think of a lot of students that are definitely worthy.

Kimberly Wallace, mother of student: ...she's been talking about this since she was itty bitty...

Aaliyah Wallace, student: I love Texas Tech. That's been my school since I was little. I've always wanted to go there. I've been guns up all the way.

Kimberly Wallace: It just felt like that last kiss from God. Just saying, well done. So just to see all her hard work just come to pass was just amazing.

(Music)

Taylor Peters, Host: THIS IS EPISODE THREE- SMALL TOWN AMERICA

(David Reyes getting in the car/driving, chatting continuing underneath)

Thomas/Taylor: Good morning. How are you?

Reyes: We're doing great. It's an early morning.

(Music)

Peters: DAVID REYES KNOWS THE BACKROADS OF WEST TEXAS WELL. HE GREW UP IN THE SMALL TOWN OF RALLS, ABOUT 35 MINUTES NORTHEAST OF LUBBOCK. HE STARTED WORKING ON THE TECH CAMPUS IN ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT IN 2023 BUT THAT RECRUITING CHANNEL QUICKLY BECAME A LOT MORE SPECIFIC WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF THE THOMA SCHOLARSHIP.

(Music)

Peters: THIS SCHOLARSHIP, NAMED AFTER THE THOMA FAMILY, IS UNIQUE. THERE ARE NOT MANY UNIVERSITIES THAT OFFER SCHOLARSHIPS OF THIS SIZE EXCLUSIVELY TO STUDENTS FROM RURAL COMMUNITIES. IT'S WORTH ABOUT \$20,000 PER STUDENT, PER YEAR.

Reyes: 'You know, growing up in high school I was that kid we are trying to target. If you wanted to go somewhere like Tech, it's possible. That's what I want to help students with... at least give them the information. Hopefully they go home and talk with their parents or guardians..

(Music)

Peters: HE SPENDS WEEKS OUT OF THE YEAR ON ROAD TRIPS LIKE THIS ONE, TRAVELING TO SELECT SMALL TOWNS ACROSS THE TEXAS PANHANDLE, OKLAHOMA AND NEW MEXICO. TODAY, WE'RE IN HAPPY. IT'S HALFWAY BETWEEN TULIA AND CANYON ON INTERSTATE 27.

Peters: ABOUT 600 PEOPLE CALL HAPPY HOME. A MAP DOT JUST OFF THE HIGHWAY SURROUNDED FOR MILES BY FARMLAND. THERE'S THE HAPPY STATE BANK ON NORTH TALLEY STREET, JUST A FEW STEPS AWAY FROM CITY HALL. IF YOU TURN DOWN NORTHEAST 3<sup>RD</sup> STREET, YOU'LL PASS BY THE LUNCH BOX. IT'S THE ONLY RESTAURANT IN TOWN. KEEP DRIVING AND YOU'LL ARRIVE AT THE HIGH

SCHOOL, WHICH SEEMS TO BE THE HEARTBEAT OF THIS COMMUNITY. AS WE PULL UP, THE CROSS COUNTRY TEAM IS JUST FINISHING A MORNING RUN, WE SIT AT A STOP SIGN AND LET THEM PASS BEFORE WE DRIVE THE NEXT 100 YARDS TO OUR FINAL DESTINATION- THE SCHOOL PARKING LOT.

(Getting out of the car)

(Busy cafeteria)

Peters: THEY'VE ALL BUT CALLED A SCHOOL ASSEMBLY FOR US. EVERY MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IS SITTING IN THE CAFETERIA CHATTERING AND FINISHING UP BREAKFAST BEFORE THE BELL RINGS AND THEIR ATTENTION IS DIRECTED TO THE FRONT.

(Introduction of David)

Peters: THERE IS INTEREST AMONG THESE STUDENTS, THEY'RE EAGER TO KNOW MORE ABOUT WHAT MAKES A STUDENT QUALIFIED TO BE A THOMA SCHOLAR. SOME OF THE STUDENTS IN THIS GROUP OF 22 SENIORS WILL ATTEND TEXAS TECH, SOME WILL ATTEND OTHER UNIVERSITIES, AND SOME WILL BEGIN WORK AND FOREGO COLLEGE ENTIRELY. DAVID IS FOCUSED ON GENERATING AS MUCH ATTENTION FOR TEXAS TECH TO ALL THREE GROUPS IN THE HOPES THAT A THOMA SCHOLAR IS SITTING IN THIS VERY ROOM.

(Music)

Peters: DAVID IS THE REAL-LIFE EMBODIMENT OF TEXAS TECH... IF THEY DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ELSE ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY, THEY AT LEAST KNOW DAVID. AND NOW, BECAUSE OF HIM, THEY HAVE A DOOR TO HELP MAKE COLLEGE POSSIBLE OR MORE FEASIBLE BY APPLYING FOR THIS SCHOLARSHIP. BUT IT'S COMPETITIVE... EVEN IN ITS FIRST YEAR, 342 STUDENTS HAVE APPLIED AND ONLY 14 ARE SELECTED... AMONG THEM ARE AALIYAH, AN 18-YEAR-OLD CO-AUTHOR AND ENTREPRENEUR AND JETT, A FOURTH GENERATION FARMER HELPING SUSTAIN THE FAMILY BUSINESS.

(Music Close)

Aaliyah Wallace: It's a little bit of, like... I've been stressed out. Yes, I have been...

Thomas Boyd: Do you mind if we just put this on? So, it just clips here...

Peters: AALIYAH WALLACE WAS BORN AND RAISED IN KRESS... IF YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF IT, YOU'RE NOT ALONE. IT'S JUST NORTH OF PLAINVIEW. SHE'S AN IMPRESSIVE STUDENT. SHE WAS THE MASCOT FOR HER HIGH SCHOOL ALL FOUR YEARS, A CHALLENGING FEAT AND ONE THAT DOCTOR'S DIDN'T RECOMMEND FOR HER.

(Aaliyah walking around at event)

Peters: WHEN SHE WAS 9, SHE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH SCOLIOSIS. SHE HAS LEARNED AND GROWN A LOT SINCE THEN. USING HER STORY TO CO-AUTHOR A BOOK WITH HER UNCLE. SHE HAS BECOME AN ADVOCATE FOR HELPING TEACH KIDS ABOUT EMBRACING THEIR STORIES... ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY INCLUDE A DIAGNOSIS LIKE HERS.

Peters: A SMATTERING PEOPLE SURROUND AALIYAH AS SHE GETS THIS EVENT GOING. SHE HAS ORGANIZED A BLOCK PARTY TO RAISE AWARENESS AND FUNDS FOR SCOLIOSIS. IT'S HER LIFE'S MISSION TO HELP KIDS LIKE HER. WHEN SHE WAS YOUNG, SHE FELT SUPPORTED BY HER FAMILY AND FRIENDS. SHE KNOWS SOME KIDS AREN'T SO LUCKY, SO IT'S IMPORTANT TO HER THAT THEY UNDERSTAND SCOLIOSIS AND CAN FIND A WAY TO OWN IT.

Kimberly Wallace: I want to bless this event before we get started. God, right now, we just thank you so much for giving us the opportunity for everybody that came out today. We just thank you for each and every person standing here. We ask that you just post your angels around this property. God, that it will be smooth and perfect in your eyes. And we give you all the glory. In Jesus name. Amen, Team, go find your station. Awesome.

(Music)

Peters: THIS IS THE FIRST TIME SHE HAS ORGANIZED SOMETHING LIKE THIS. THERE ARE GAMES, FOOD TRUCKS, A WATER SLIDE, RAFFLES, A DUNK TANK, BASKETBALL... A DJ.

Aaliyah Wallace: There is a lot. There's a lot. My grandmother, she's making a funnel cake, is definitely a family function. My family is like, they're all in. My mom even got shirts. She was so proud of her shirts. And my dad went, got us all fanny packs today. And I was like, What's it for? And he's like, you look cool.

Peters: IT TOOK A VILLAGE TO GET THIS EVENT UP AND RUNNING... HER NANA CALLS OUT TO AALIYAH BEHIND THE HOT OIL WHERE SHE'S MAKING FUNNEL CAKES, DUSTING THEM WITH POWDERED SUGAR. HER DAD BRODERICK IS HELPING PUT VOLUNTEERS IN PLACE AND ACROSS THE WAY, ME-MAW IS SELLING SOCKS. MEMAW CALLS AALIYAH LADYBUG. A NICKNAME SHE GAVE HER BECAUSE OF THE LADYBUG STICKERS THAT COVERED THE BACK BRACE AALIYAH WORE FOR MOST OF HER CHILDHOOD. FOR AALIYAH'S MOM KIMBERLY, GETTING THE NEWS THAT HER YOUNGEST CHILD HAS SCOLIOSIS WAS SCARY.

Kimberly: I remember my oldest daughter was deployed at the time and we made Aaliyah, walk to the car, just broke down, and we called Alexis, and she broke down. But then we just kind of began to put the pieces back together again.

Peters: KIMBERLY REMEMBERS THOSE DAYS WELL. THE GOOD AND THE BAD ALL ROLLED IN TOGETHER.

Kimberly: The brace was so uncomfortable; it would bruise her ribs. I mean, we did a lot of just holding and crying, and I did a lot of chasing her around the house. And she was, you know, little. So, she didn't understand. She would run from me and I don't want to.

Kimberly: We had a lot of that, but I had to be the bad guy. Yeah, it's. It's for your own good. Even though you don't see it.

Peters: A LOT OF THOSE DAYS WERE TOUGH. BUT SO WAS KIMBERLY, AN IMPORTANT TRAIT THAT ALL THREE OF HER CHILDREN POSSESS, INCLUDING AALIYAH.

Kimberly: She just decided it wasn't going to be her downfall. And I been right there to root her because I'm like, hey, this is if this is our path, this is our journey, then let's go.

(Music)

Peters: ALIYAH HAS ALWAYS HELD HERSELF TO A REALLY HIGH STANDARD. SHE KNOWS WHAT SHE'S CAPABLE OF AND DOESN'T SETTLE FOR LESS. IT'S ONE OF THE THINGS THE THOMA SCHOLARSHIP COMMITTEE RECOGNIZED ABOUT HER IMMEDIATELY, IT'S WHAT MADE HER A UNANIMOUS VOTE. THE THOMA SCHOLARSHIP COMMITTEE LOOKS FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE DETERMINED, COMPASSIONATE, RESPONSIBLE, WHO LEAD WITH GRIT AND PERSISTENCE.

Peters: THAT'S WHAT THE COMMITTEE SEES IN AALIYAH AND WHAT THEY SEE IN FELLOW THOMA SCHOLAR JETT RAEMAKERS. WE MEET HIM AFTER THE BREAK.

(Bag zipping up)

Peters: WE'VE JUST PULLED IN TO NAZARETH TEXAS... JUST LIKE KRESS, IT'S ONE OF THE MANY STOPS DAVID HAS MADE IN HIS RECRUITING TRIPS FOR THIS SCHOLARSHIP. THE DRIVE FROM LUBBOCK IS ABOUT AN HOUR AND 15 MINUTES. A NARROW BLUE SIGN OUTSIDE THE 19<sup>TH</sup> HOLE CAFE LISTS DOZENS OF YEARS IN PEELING YELLOW PAINT. IT'S A TRIBUTE TO THE LEGENDARY HIGH SCHOOL GIRL'S BASKETBALL PROGRAM AND ALL THE STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS WON OVER THE YEARS. SPOILER ALERT: THERE ARE A LOT... 25 TO BE EXACT, MORE THAN ANY OTHER GIRLS PROGRAM IN THE HISTORY OF TEXAS IN ANY CLASSIFICATION. IF YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT NAZARETH, YOU PROBABLY **KNOW** THAT. BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT HAS BROUGHT US HERE ON THIS PARTICULAR WEDNESDAY MORNING.

Thomas: "How's it going? Good to see you again. This is Michael."

Peters: THOMAS AND ONE OF OUR VIDEOGRAPHERS MICHAEL ARE MET AT THE FRONT DOOR AND GREETED BY JETT RAMAEKERS AND HIS FAMILY.

Peggy Ramaekers, mom of student: I'm Peggy, I'm Jett's mom, y'all can come on in. This is Riley, Jett's twin sister.

Peters: THEIR HOME IS INVITING, PICTURES OF A YOUNG JETT, RILEY AND LEXI FILL THE WALLS OF THE ENTRYWAY. HE AND HIS TWIN SISTER RILEY ARE BOTH FRESHMAN ON CAMPUS THIS FALL... THEIR YOUNGER SISTER, LEXI LOOKS SO MUCH LIKE THEM, SHE COULD BE A TRIPLET. SHE'S 16. JETT'S MOM PEGGY IS KIND. SHE'S UNDENIABLY PROUD OF HER KIDS AND HER TOWN.

Peggy: I'm not sure how much time you have, but our church is really pretty, of course our basketball gym is cool... and the Ag shop...

Peggy: Y'all take Jett and get what you need...

Thomas: Okay, yeah, we can follow you or whatever. Okay it's good to see y'all.

Peters: JETT SPENDS A LITTLE MORE THAN 12 HOURS A DAY IN THE FIELD DURING THIS TIME OF THE YEAR, SOME DAYS THAT MEANS HARVESTING WHEAT OR CORN WITH HIS DAD OR OPERATING THE GRAIN TRACTOR. SOMETIMES, LIKE TODAY, THAT MEANS WEED MANAGEMENT ON THE BLADE PLOW. THE RECENT RAIN HAS LED TO OVERGROWN WEEDS THEY NEED TO ELIMINATE BEFORE THEY PLANT. OVER TWO LARGE FIELDS AVERAGING AROUND 160 ACRES.

Jett Ramaekers, student: The first time I drove a tractor was in the third grade. I started plowing one time. And of course, the first time I, I plowed the I looked back and the wheel was gone... I've been driving tractor for a long time and I'm grateful for it because it's taught me that taught me how to work for the public. It's what my dad says. Yeah. How to meet other people's expectations. Yeah.

(Music)

Peters: FARMING IS JUST HALF OF THE RESPONSIBILITY JETT HAS HELD THROUGHOUT THE YEARS; ON TOP OF BEING A GOOD STUDENT, INVOLVED WITH HIS CHURCH'S YOUTH GROUP AND MEMBER OF THE GOLF TEAM, JETT SPENT MOST OF HIS TIME MANAGING THE MANY FFA JUDGING TEAMS FOR WHICH HE COMPETED. LIVESTOCK JUDGING, COTTON AND FORAGE JUDGING AND SENIOR QUIZ. HIS OTHER PASSION, AND THE ONE THAT HIS FAMILY IS KNOWN FOR IS RAISING PIGS.

(Music)

Peters: FOR FOUR GENERATIONS ON HIS MOM'S SIDE, HIS FAMILY HAS BEEN PERFECTING THE PIG RAISING PROCESS. AND JETT HAS UPHELD THE REPUTATION WELL. HE SAYS THAT HE'S ABLE TO BALANCE SUCH A BUSY SCHEDULE BECAUSE OF THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM. NOT ONLY HIS FAMILY, BUT HIS COMMUNITY TOO.

Jett: I mean, coming from a small community and I think it is, it is taught me to just connect with other people a lot easier. It's taught me to be involved in my community. And it really does take everybody, especially here in Nazareth, when there's less than 300 people.

Peters: HE HAS ALWAYS KNOWN THAT THIS COMMUNITY RALLIES FOR ITS OWN, AND THAT WAS REINFORCED IN A BIG WAY DURING HIS INTERVIEW PROCESS FOR THE SCHOLARSHIP.

Jett: And then after I heard I moved on to the interview section, I spent a lot of time with teachers and my superintendent getting ready for my interview, and I'm grateful for them to helping me to get to where I am now.

Peters: THIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO THRIVE IN A SMALL TOWN, THE 'HELP YOUR NEIGHBOR' MENTALITY IS MORE REAL THAN ANYTHING. THE PRIDE THAT COMES FROM ANOTHER STATE CHAMPIONSHIP IS THE SAME ONE THAT IS FELT WHEN IT'S A GOOD YEAR FOR THE CROP OR THE HIGH SCHOOL FFA TEAM WINS BIG OR A YOUNG MAN IS PICKED TO REPRESENT HIS SMALL TOWN FOR A BIG SCHOLARSHIP.

(Music)

Jett: The whole process for me, I know it was very tough for the committee to pick their 14 students, but it was stressful to say the least.

Aaliyah: So I was actually headed to Dallas because I was headed to competition

Jett: When I opened it, I was in Lubbock for area livestock judging,

Aaliyah: And my mom comes in, She's like, You have a package at your sister's house.

Jett: And sure enough, my mom's calling me saying I had a package from Texas Tech on the front doorstep

Aaliyah: I started screaming at my mom and they ripped it open and they're crying over the over the phone... She's like, what's wrong? I was like, I have a scholarship. So, I call my dad and my dad like, I'm pulling a driveway right now.... he starts crying.

Jett: And I was I was so excited. It was definitely a weight lifted off my shoulders.

Aaliyah: I've always wanted to go to Tech. That's been my dream school, but I thought it was going to be way too expensive.

Aaliyah: So kind of being able to relieve that financial burden and get to live out my dream as well was like. Like cherry on top.

(Music)

Peters: THIS IS WHAT THE THOMA FAMILY HOPED FOR WHEN THEY CREATED THIS SCHOLARSHIP. THAT WORTHY TOWNS AND WORTHY STUDENTS WOULD GET THE CREDIT THEY DESERVE. YOU CAN IMAGINE, THIS SELECTION PROCESS IS RIGOROUS. EACH STUDENT HAS TO APPLY, AND GET ACCEPTED TO TECH, BEFORE THEY'RE ELIGIBLE TO APPLY FOR THE SCHOLARSHIP. THEN, THE HARD WORK STARTS FOR THE SCHOLARSHIP COMMITTEE.

(Music)

Hale: All right, well, we'll go ahead and get started. (Following portion is underneath my track)

Peters: JASON HALE IS AN ASSISTANT VP IN ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT. HE LEADS THIS COMMITTEE.

Hale: And today's really a pivotal point in that when we start making selections of the Thomas Scholars. When we start today, what we want to do is look at, you know, this program is not just providing that financial support for students, but it's also creating those opportunities for students that otherwise wouldn't have an opportunity to attend Texas Tech. So truly a scholars program that's going to change their lives. What we are doing today is looking for those students that, you know, have demonstrated academic excellence, but also have provided, you know, a great deal of leadership experiences. We're going to look at their letters of recommendation, their essays, kind of their skills and talents that they've been involved with in high school.

Peters: MORE THAN 300 APPLY, ONLY 40 STUDENTS WILL BE OFFERED AN INTERVIEW, FROM THERE THE FINAL 14 ARE SELECTED.

(Music)

Peters: THE 6 PERSON COMMITTEE SITS AROUND A CONFERENCE TABLE... ON THE MONITOR ACROSS THE ROOM IS AN EXCEL SPREADSHEET THAT INCLUDES THE NAMES, STATES, COUNTIES, GPA... AND OTHER RELEVANT FACTORS THAT QUALIFY EACH STUDENT FOR THIS SCHOLARSHIP.

(Talking continuing underneath)

Peters: DAVID IS HERE, YOU KNOW HIM. AND THERE ARE OTHERS FROM ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT AND STUDENT SUCCESS.

Reyes: I do think it's going to be a strong class, first class, definitely. So I'm happy to say that I've met a lot of students and, you know, I've gotten a lot of I know a lot of personal stories just from meeting them and emailing with them and and all of that. So it's a it's a blessing to have this many good applicants, but it's going to be hard for sure.

Hale: Well, we have a busy two days ahead of us, so we should probably get started.

Peters: THEY'VE APPROACHED THIS PROCESS WITH CARE AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL. IT'S A LOT OF RESPONSIBILITY TO FIND THE RIGHT STUDENTS AND THEY ACCEPT THAT CHALLENGE. STAY WITH US, WE'LL BE RIGHT BACK.

(Music)

(Campus sounds, walking, trees, footsteps)

Peters: BY NOW, JETT AND AALIYAH AND THE OTHERS ARE OFFICIALLY COLLEGE STUDENTS. THE SEMESTER HAS STARTED IN A BUZZ OF EXCITEMENT AND ANTICIPATION AND NERVES. BUT TODAY, THEY'RE TAKING A BREAK BEFORE CLASS TO MEET A COUPLE OF VERY IMPORTANT PEOPLE.

Carl Thoma: Even though I've been doing this a long time I'm just about as nervous as you are...We are really humbled that this is the first class that's going to do this...

Peters: CARL THOMA STANDS AT THE FRONT OF THE ROOM, A LIGHT GRAY SUIT COAT OVER THE TOP OF HIS CRISP DRESS SHIRT. HIS WIFE MARILYNN SITS NEXT TO HIM ON A COUCH, HER ICONIC ROUND BLUE AND BLACK GLASSES STAND OUT. HER TAPERED TEXAS TECH RED SKIRT FALLS SOFTLY AROUND HER KNEES. THEY'VE CAPTURED THE ATTENTION OF THE ROOM.

Carl: You've got the hard part of taking the time that you're going to have by not having to worry about financial matters and not have to worry about three jobs to pay tuition, to take that time to develop yourself, develop your leadership skills...

Peters: CARL GOES ON TO DELIVER THE BEST COLLEGE ADVICE HE CAN MUSTER... AND THE STUDENTS HAVE A CHANCE TO DELIVER THEIR OWN WORDS OF GRATITUDE AND BRING TO LIGHT THE THINGS THEY THINK MAKE THIS GROUP SPECIAL.

Wes: So, before I start, Mr. Mrs. Toma, I think I speak on behalf of all of us. We're immensely grateful. I know there's some of us who have had family who's never gone to college before, some of us who have been told for all of our lives that college is the way we need to go. And you all are making this possible for each one of us. So, thank you for that.

Emma: We all come from different backgrounds, and so I'm just really excited to see, like, where all we go because all of our majors are completely different from one another. A I think it was so interesting that, like, whenever we got on zoom or got in a room together, we weren't the same. I mean, we're the same type of people, but we came from different places in our lives and I think it's exciting to see where we're all going to end up one day.

(Music)

Carl: I guess from my way of thinking, Marylenn and I... and Marylenn had a stroke a few years ago. So, she understands you, but she's got aphasia. So, I mean sometimes you can't understand her. But she was in some ways she was more accomplished than that than I was.

Marilynn: Yes!

(Laughter)

Peters: ALTHOUGH MARILYNN IS QUIET THROUGHOUT THIS EVENT, SHE LISTENS INTENTLY, NODDING AND SMILING AND OFFERING AN OCCASIONAL WINK. THE WORDS THAT CARL SAYS ARE **FOR** THE STUDENTS IN THE ROOM... BUT WHEN HE DELIVERS THEM, HE LOOKS RIGHT AT MARILYNN. ALMOST AS IF TO REINFORCE THEIR PARTNERSHIP. TO DRIVE HOME THAT THIS SCHOLARSHIP, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE IN THEIR LIFE, IT'S SOMETHING THEY'VE DONE TOGETHER.

(Music)

Peters: THE BUILD UP TO THIS GIFT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME COMING, SO BEING ABLE TO MEET THE FIRST COHORT FOR THE FIRST TIME IS A SPECIAL AND IMPORTANT MOMENT. TO SHAKE A HAND OR HUG A NECK OR HEAR A STORY OF WHY THIS SCHOLARSHIP MEANS SO MUCH.

Carl: Good. Thank you. Hi. I'm Carl Toma. So, what county did you get your buckle from?

Emma Talley, student: Hall County Texas. Scoring state and soil judging.

Carl: In what?

Emma: Soil judging.

Carl: Oh, soil. Wow.

Peters: EMMA TALLEY IS FROM MEMPHIS TEXAS. IT'S UP IN THE PANHANDLE, ROUGHLY 30 MINUTES FROM THE OKLAHOMA BORDER.

Emma: You all inspire me every day. Like, whenever me and my dad were looking into the scholarship. I was like, whenever I got the little gift box, that was probably the coolest way that I've ever gotten a scholarship.

Peters: SHE TURNS HER FULL ATTENTION NOW AND SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO MARILYNN.

Emma: But I mean, you inspire me. My dad, actually, my freshman year, had a stroke. And he ended up having a massive heart attack and then having bypass surgery. And then, like, a week after the surgery. So, whenever you said that, I was like, I relate, like I completely understand your struggle and my parents do too.

Carl: You know, he sounds like he's getting better and that's good.

(Music)

Peters: MARILYNN AND CARL LEAN IN TO EMMA WHILE SHE SHARES THIS VULNERABLE SENTIMENT. SHE WASN'T THE FIRST STUDENT TO EXPRESS HOW IMPORTANT THIS SCHOLARSHIP IS, AND SHE WON'T BE THE LAST. NOT BY A LONG SHOT. THESE 14 STUDENTS REPRESENT JUST THE BEGINNING OF A COMMITMENT THAT THE THOMAS HAVE MADE TO SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE REGION AND TO TEXAS TECH. THEY'VE THOUGHT FOR A LONG TIME ABOUT WHAT THEY WANTED THIS SCHOLARSHIP TO LOOK LIKE, WHO THEY WANTED IT TO SERVE. AND AS THEY LOOK AT THIS GROUP, THAT VISION HAS MATERIALIZING BEFORE THEIR EYES. THEIR LEGACY WILL GO ON TO IMPACT DOZENS OF STUDENTS IN THE FUTURE. AND IT ALL STARTED WITH CARL AND MARILYNN'S ROOTS IN SMALL TOWN AMERICA.

(Music)

Peters: FEARLESS IS PRODUCED BY TEXAS TECH MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS. IT'S HOSTED AND WRITTEN BY ME, TAYLOR PETERS. THOMAS BOYD IS OUR AUDIO ENGINEER- HE DOES SOUND DESIGN AND EDITS THIS PODCAST. LEARN MORE ABOUT FEARLESS AND SEE BEHIND THE SCENES PHOTOS BY CLICKING THE LINK IN OUR SHOW NOTES. AND DON'T FORGET TO FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA. FEARLESS IS A TEXAS TECH PRODUCTION. FROM HERE, IT'S POSSIBLE.