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THE UNSEEN LIFE OF Tom Hill

BY JARED RANEY | DESIGN MACKENZIE FERGUSON
PHOTO LIZ ZABEL AND JARED RANEY
AND COURTESY OF TOM HILL
There's more to the Senior Vice President of Student Affairs than meets the eye.

The office that Dr. Thomas Hill works in is large, complete with a wood paneled desk, wall-to-wall bookshelf and conference table. Iowa State University’s vice president of student affairs uses all this space, bouncing back and forth from desk to conference table—whichever is the least covered in stacks of paper at the time.

His day is filled with meetings and phone calls, whether it’s a meeting to advise a group of graduate students working on a project or taking a call from an old Olympic teammate who’s looking to get one of his athletes a scholarship.

Oh, for those of you who don’t know, the 6’2”, 64-year-old administrator was an Olympic bronze medalist—just a single feat on his laundry list of accomplishments.

He’s also an Army veteran from the Vietnam era with a PhD in Counselor Education. None of which would be nearly as impressive until you learn the same man grew up in a poor housing project in New Orleans, just one of five brothers raised by a single mother.

Many days, Hill doesn’t have time to leave his office for lunch. His administrative specialist, Rose Wilbanks, often orders him a quick meal between meetings.

“I have an open door policy,” Hill says, which makes it hard to get busy-work like reading and writing done.

Hill says he’s often in the office past 5 p.m., and even on those days, he may have to stay up later into the night to catch up.

Anyone who knows or has even met Hill will tell you he loves to help people.

“There’s no doubt that he’s a counselor at heart,” says Martino Harmon, the new associate vice president under Hill. “He’s always trying to understand people, and figure out what their motivations are, and how he can be supportive of their motivations.”

“What I admire most is when I see him with students,” Wilbanks says. “Just the instant relationship he can build.”

The Student Affairs office is dedicated to supporting students and providing the necessary tools to foster growth and improve the student experience. It is an office that fits Hill perfectly.

“The one thing that I always thought that, really, Tom stood out in is his deep, really deep care and interest in student welfare and student success,” says former ISU President Gregory Geoffroy. “He really cared about students. I saw that very early on and throughout his entire time.”

A meeting with four graduate students working on a project to conceptualize a multicultural center in the Memorial Union—routine for Hill—demonstrated the passion he has for his job.

“I want to shake you up—that’s my goal,” Hill said multiple times to the students. “I want you to shake it up. Be bold enough to say, ‘I won’t stand by this.’”

At the end of the 45-minute meeting, the grad students were more than a little stunned and a bit speechless.

“You’re definitely given us a lot to think about,” one student said—a definite understatement after Hill completely reimagined the direction and scope of their project.

“I dream about this stuff,” Hill says. “I sit and I dream about it.”

After the meeting, he encouraged the students—as he does all students who come to his office—to return as the project developed for further counsel.
“I’m not one of those guys that does a drive-by. I’ll ride with you the whole way,” Hill says.

His interest in students stems from his own time in college. College was what Hill described as his first “integrated experience.” After attending a segregated high school and living in a mostly black neighborhood, Arkansas State University was a culture shock, to say the least.

Despite the challenges of such a novel experience, Hill blossomed during his time there—as an athlete, and more importantly as a leader.

In high school, Hill was a high-jumper and long-jumper. Track has always been a means to an end for Hill. He never imagined competing beyond high school, but when he was offered a full scholarship to Arkansas State University to compete as a hurdlery, his mother encouraged him to accept.

Hill says he would’ve done whatever he needed to get his scholarship, so when the coach started him in the new event, he embraced it.

He competed in the 110-meter hurdles, and by the time he left Arkansas State with four conference championship titles, he was considered one of the fastest hurdlers in the world. In 1970, his hurdle time was ranked first in the world by “Track & Field News”.

Hill was the first member of his family to graduate from college. With a bachelor’s degree in physical education and an already impressive athletic career with Arkansas State, Hill continued into drafted service after college.

As far as active duty goes, Hill had a pretty nice commission. Though he didn’t enlist, Hill served six years, between two years of ROTC in college and four years of drafted active duty at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point—the only second lieutenant in the Academy.

As rough as being drafted might sound, Hill’s track career earned him a spot on the Army Track Team, where he was paid to train and travel around the world, visiting clinics in at least a dozen countries.

It was during this time that Hill earned his bronze medal in the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany.

In that time period, it was difficult to compete professionally in track and field because of the amount of time needed for training and the relatively small amount of money the sport provided. Luckily, as an athlete for the Army, Hill was able to train full-time and be paid for it.

Competing in the Olympics was amazing for Hill, “a peak experience,” as he describes it, though 44 years later, when he thinks back on the influencing factors in his life, it doesn’t make the top of the list.

His list reads like this: his mother, his marriage, his kids, his divorce, his remarriage and his grandchildren. These are the most important parts of Hill’s life—not the Olympic medal that sits on a shelf in his house.

Let’s start with his marriage.

Today, Hill is happily married to Billye, the girl he met as a young track star at Arkansas State, one starry night when he and a friend went to a nearby restaurant for burgers.

Billye’s father owned the restaurant, and they might never have met if Hill hadn’t decided his burger was too rare and complained to her father, earning himself a hard look from Billye.

A few weeks later, a friend asked him to do a favor by going on a double date with Billye and her twin sister, Bobby, and “the rest is history,” Hill says.
The pair married in Jan. of 1971, one year before Hill went to Munich and won the bronze medal in hurdles. For 16 years they lived together happily, having two kids along the way: first Thomas, then Kevin.

The duo’s past hasn’t all been rainbows and unicorns; it was the summer of their 16th year that things deteriorated.

“It was kind of eye opening, to see how families can break apart,” Thomas says. “It drove me, it actually kind of made me focus harder on trying to be successful at something.”

Time apart in different cities while Hill was attending grad school took its toll on the couple, and “the relationship fractured,” Hill says.

Despite their issues, the two made it their ultimate goal to be there for the kids. After the split, Thomas and Kevin stayed with Billye in Arkansas, but Hill did everything he could to be around his sons, sometimes taking a quick flight from New Orleans for a parent-teacher conference or, later, leaving his job in Oklahoma early and driving three hours to go to a basketball game.

“Him and my mom created one of the best atmospheres a kid could have, you know, we definitely had the things that we needed, and extra things,” Thomas says.

“On a scale of one to 10 I would have given him a nine,” Billye says. “He’d be surprised to hear that, but I’d give him nine. The period of time we were not together our boys were teenagers, but even then, he was still instrumental in their upbringing.”

The divorce, though they did their best to make it easier on the kids, was one of the biggest regrets of Hill’s life and one of the hardest obstacles to overcome.

“If all the things that I’d gone through, that was probably the most traumatic, the most difficult for me,” Hill says. “When we split, I went to New Orleans because I had to go someplace where there was someone who loved me unconditionally.”

The person Hill is referring to is his mother, Mattie Hill, one of the most influential guiding forces in Hill’s life. He says she was the reason he survived the divorce.

“She put me back together’s what she did,” Hill says. “She consoled me when I needed it, she kicked me in my butt when I needed it.”

Fortunately for Billye and Hill, that was just an early chapter in their ongoing love story.

After 22 years, with the surreptitious help of Billye’s sister Bobby and an old Army buddy, the two were pushed back together, and the relationship began to mend.

“Tom and I were always best friends and I think because of that, you know, that allowed us to do what we did as far as our kids’ upbringing,” Billye says. “And you know this whole thing about you can have soul mates and you marry your first love and all that, so I would think it was always a connection.”

At one time Hill’s friends devised a “Parent Trap”-type scheme for the estranged couple on a cruise boat, and though the plan fell through, Billye and Hill started talking about what it would be like to be together again.

“During that time, neither one of us ever remarried and stuff, and because I think we always knew we would get back together,” Billye says.

Eventually the interactions culminated in a simple phone conversation, with Hill asking the big question.

“He called me one evening and says, ‘You know, I’ve always been in love with you, I’ll always love you, and I was just calling to see if we can get back together.’ I said sure we can. He said, ‘Really?’ I said, really! It’s like we’ve never been divorced,” Billye says.

“She said, ‘What took you so long?’” Hill says.

“I was thinking to myself, if I’d known it’d be that easy I’d have asked you a long time ago,” They remarried in 2009, so the love story turned out well in the end—in fact, the two are thinking about writing and publishing a book on relationships.

But the relationship in its adolescence created a lot of stress in Hill’s life, especially in his ability to be a good father to his kids, something he regretted considering his own lack of fatherly influence.

“I don’t have a lasting memory. I remember him being in the house, and not a steady presence,” Hill says of his father. “He didn’t have that big of an impact.”

Hill didn’t go to the funeral when his father died sometime around 1969, a date he couldn’t remember for sure, and when he got the news it was like hearing a stranger had died.

“The worst thing that happened to me was when me and my wife divorced,” Hill says. “That was hard, because I had promised myself and I’d promised my kids that I would never—I wouldn’t do that, I wouldn’t be away from them.”

“What I tried to do was to stay involved,” Hill continues. “I did what I could, because that’s the impact that my father not being present had on me... Made me want to be as good a man as I possibly could be. And I just kind of had to feel my way through the role of being a father.”

Hill says one of his proudest achievements is the kind of father his son Kevin has become for Hill’s two grandsons, Alexander, 5, and Nicholas, 2.
“That motivated me when I was in times that would be challenging... I’ve got an Olympian’s blood running through my veins. I can do it.”