

# Williamston Wendy's Supports Local VR Program

**D**ave Thomas started his hamburger business in 1969 with two main focuses: to serve great hamburgers and to have a business with “family” as a core value. When searching for a name for his new endeavor, he tried all of his children’s names out with the nickname for Melinda Lou being chosen – Wendy(’s). His big goal at this time was to also, at some point, be able to expand the business so that all five of his children could have summer jobs!

Thomas had previously taken over a group of Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants that were not performing well and, after a lot of hard work, was able to sell them for \$1.5 million dollars. This money was used to open his first Wendy’s and the rest is history.

The extremely successful entrepreneur had a rocky start in life, however, with his mother abandoning him as a young child. He was adopted but his adoptive mother died when he was only 5. His years growing up with a father, who moved around constantly and remarried several times, made life difficult. However, he did have his maternal grandmother who played a large role in his life teaching him, among other things, that “hard work was good for the soul.” She also told him to “never cut corners” which is why Wendy’s hamburgers are square – to remind him.



Dave did learn a lot about restaurants though from his Dad. The two ate out a lot, and Dave was self-educated about all aspects of the business. He even decided at 8 he was going to open a restaurant and at 12 he got his first restaurant job but was let go when the owner found out he wasn’t 16. Eventually, he ended up working at a family owned restaurant in Knoxville, Tennessee where he was treated like family and learned his work ethic.

This background of Dave Thomas brings us to the Williamston Wendy’s General Manager, Latoya Josiah. Latoya began working at Wendy’s in New Bern, NC around six years ago. She rose up through the ranks and was “given” a store to manage in 2015. She is a single Mother of three and views Wendy’s as her family’s extended family.

When ME’s Employment Specialist, Blondell, met with Latoya to talk about hiring some clients, she was met with “sure, bring them in.” How did she come to be so open to hiring people with disabilities? Josiah saw people with disabilities working in the New Bern Wendy’s doing a good job so she had no problem doing the same at her store. She was actually following another part of Wendy’s culture - to support the people in the community where the business is located

This led to seven people being hired through ME’s Vocational Rehabilitation program. Although Latoya is very direct and straight forward with her employees (Wendy’s has three main thrusts in this component of its organizational culture: (1) honesty, (2) integrity, and (3) respect for one another.) she really wants them to be happy. “I want to see all of them smile. I know they are capable, but they need to be happy here to be successful. I want to see that on their faces.”