

Kim Thomas - Stockton

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

October 2016. It is the League of Kansas Municipalities annual conference, and it is time to pass the gavel to a new president. This new president will have several distinctions: She is a woman, she is an African-American, and she comes from rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Kim Thomas is the Mayor of Stockton, Kansas. Her family has deep roots in northwest Kansas, where she is the fifth generation to come from the community of Nicodemus. As we have previously profiled, Nicodemus is a historic African American community which was settled after the Civil War.

"My great-grandfather had the annual Nicodemus community celebration in his grove," Kim said. She grew up in Plainville but spent lots of time with her grandparents in Nicodemus.

While still in high school, she worked for Southwestern Bell as a telephone operator. She went on to Emporia State and then came back to northwest Kansas to work for Southwestern Bell on equipment. She spent 32 years before retiring as a communications technician with the company, located at various towns throughout the region.

In 1992, her job brought her to Stockton. Two male employees had retired in neighboring towns, and Stockton was located between the two communities so she could serve both. "I told them it took one woman to replace two men," she said with a smile.

"I always tried to get involved in whatever community I was located in," Kim said. Her son was a wrestler, so she coached wrestling and the local softball teams through the years.

Then her co-workers encouraged her to run for the city council in Stockton. "They thought it would stir things up," Kim said. She ran and did not make it the first time, but when she ran again in 1999, she got elected to the city commission. She continued to serve through the years, and in 2002 she became Mayor – a position she has held ever since.

Kim Thomas is the first female African American mayor in the state of Kansas. "My grandmother was a teacher," Kim said. "We were taught to work hard – that was more important than the color of your skin."

Her hard work has paid off. She has led her community through major improvements in the water plant, sewage treatment facility, water line replacements, housing improvements, new businesses downtown, and enhancements of the city power plant.

"It's a good community," Kim said. "People work together here." She represented her community on many other organizations as well, from the Rooks County Economic Development board to the boards of the Kansas Municipal Utilities, Kansas Municipal Energy Agency, Kansas hospital auxiliary and more.

Kim was appointed to the Board of the League of Kansas Municipalities and has continued to move through the chairs of that organization. As Vice President, she is scheduled to assume the reins as President in October 2016. "It is an honor," Kim said.

“Home rule is very important to us,” Kim said. “The state doesn’t like it when rules are passed down to them from the feds, and the cities don’t like it when it happens to us,” she said.

Stockton is unusual among small communities in that the town’s leaders make a trip to Topeka each year. “We meet with agency heads and others, but we don’t go in asking for things. We ask how we can be of help to them,” she said. “I even take cookies every year,” Kim said. “I’m kind of known as the cookie lady.”

In 2014, the Kansas Mayors Association named Kim the Mayor of the Year. In September 2016 she will receive the Kansas Community Outreach Award from the Kansas African American Museum, before becoming League President in October. It’s a remarkable record for a person from the rural community of Stockton, population 1,535 people. Now, that’s rural.

It will soon be time to pass the gavel to a new president of the League of Kansas Municipalities, and this president is a remarkable African American woman from rural Kansas. We salute Kim Thomas of Stockton for making a difference with her groundbreaking service through the years. Her ancestors in Nicodemus would be proud.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.