

## No doubting Thomas: CEO reveals secret to success

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Giving back: businessman Thomas Olunloyo believes giving back is a necessity - not just something that we could do (Photograph supplied)

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At 13, Thomas Olunloyo was homeless. Now, he is the chief executive of a multibillion-dollar company, ever thankful for the education he got and the hospitality jobs that helped pay for it.

So when Covid-19 shuttered restaurants and left some students trying to do schoolwork without the necessary tools, he stepped up.

"It's a really big part of who I am and just how I view the world," said Mr Olunloyo, whose company Legal & General Reinsurance partnered with the Bermuda Chamber of Commerce to give grocery vouchers to restaurant workers and laptops to students in need.

"For me, giving back is a necessity. It's not just something that we could do, it's something that we should do and I've been very passionate about doing so all my life."

The businessman first put that passion to work in London, where he ran a programme that taught finance to students at schools in lower-income neighbourhoods.

Part of the drive came from his early experience. Homeless and alone as a teenager, a shelter for young people got him off the streets and ultimately set him on a different path.

"I came from a broken home. There were mental-illness issues in my family, which led to homelessness and abandonment when I was in my early teens," he said.

"My journey since then has been one of creating for myself the reality in life that I want, effectively realising my dream irrespective of that background. And the thing that really enabled that is education.

"The single thing that has opened up all possibilities, that I could be sitting here as CEO of a multibillion-dollar company, is the education that I received."

With no money of his own, he was initially enrolled in what became one of the "50 worst schools in the UK"; hard work helped turn that circumstance around.

"It doesn't matter where you are, if you're able to apply yourself, you can make the most out of an opportunity. I went from that school to one of the best grammar schools in the UK and then to Oxford — and the rest is history, if you will.

"I worked hard. I applied myself. I was very focused on what I wanted in life. It's a very simple formula, actually, that anyone can replicate to a large extent."

Work as a bartender and a waiter helped him along the way. That "personal connection" led him to reach out when Covid-19 left more than 2,000 servers unemployed.

According to Mr Olunloyo, 1,035 people registered for his Serving the Servers initiative which distributed 300 grocery vouchers last week.

"Many people at this time need some help, some support. I think that as a community we need to come together.

"One of the jobs that I did when I was a kid to make money, was working in restaurants, working in bars. It's something that got me through a lot of hard times.

There's a lot of pain going on in that industry right now, as there is in a lot of other industries. Because of that personal connection, it's something that I felt I had to do."

Mr Olunloyo has also set a goal of providing 1,302 students with computers. Working with Mirrors, he was able to identify those "in urgent need"; 75 students will have been given new laptops before the end of the school year.

"We have to do our best," he said of the \$500,000 initiative.

"We can't necessarily help everyone all at the same time but we can certainly help as many people as we can right now.

"We want to try to do that. We want to push as hard as we can, raise as much money as possible and make sure that it gets in the hands of those who really need it."

Describing education as "the ultimate equaliser" he believes the laptops are one way of creating opportunity for students — as long as they are also willing to put in the work.

"I actually have a personal statement I wrote when I was 14, that I was going to go to Oxford, study maths, become an actuary and run my own business after seven or eight years in the industry — I did all of those things.

"With the right access to education, with the right schools, any child in Bermuda absolutely can achieve the wildest extent of their dreams — if they apply themselves enough. It really is a combination of opportunity and application. To have those two things, that's the magic formula, nothing else."

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