A few questions for
Mary Thomas

The job—and it is a job—of spouse of a university president is one of those demanding, high-profile, but poorly defined vocations for which no one ever actually applies.

When Ron Thomas became president of the University of Puget Sound in 2003, his wife, Mary, admits “first lady” was a position that took some getting used to. She’d spent the previous 14 years as a dean and faculty member at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.

“I’d been wrapped up in my own career for a very long time,” she says. “When we came here, I had to make some real adjustments. Some of them sound like such simple things, but they signified a huge life change for me.”

Her days, which had formerly been scheduled by an assistant and governed by her BlackBerry, were suddenly less structured. When people asked what she did, she found herself at a loss for words. She was working—as most university presidents’ spouses do—to raise money, manage the presidential home, host social events, and serve on a multitude of volunteer boards, but she held no formal position, had no job title, and received no compensation.

“For years, students hadn’t called me anything other than ‘Dean Thomas,’” she says. “When we got here, I had to stop myself every time someone called me ‘Mrs. Thomas’ or ‘Mary.’ It was almost like I went through this identity crisis and had to figure out again who I was.”
But these days, Mary Thomas knows exactly who she is, and she seems quite comfortable in her role. She’s a gracious host and eloquent representative of the university. She’s also a thoughtful, honest, and intelligent sounding board for her husband.

“I like to think I’m an important part of the team,” she says.

The other Thomas agrees: “‘Team’ is a good way of describing our relationship,” he says. “We are quite different, and we complement each other so well. I couldn’t play in this league without her.”

The daughter of Philippine immigrants, Mary Thomas grew up in Seattle and attended Holy Names Academy there. A lover of languages, she headed east to Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in classical Greek. She earned her master’s and doctorate degrees in comparative literature from Princeton.

She taught at the University of Southern California and University of California, Santa Cruz, before taking her first administration position in 1982, coordinating Stanford University’s Western Culture program. In 1989 she left California for a deanship at Trinity.

Arches writer Mary Boone recently sat down with Mary Thomas to ask her what it’s like being back on the West Coast and how she feels about being a part of Puget Sound’s “Team Thomas.”

Arches: Tell us how you and Ron met.

MT: We met at Trinity College. I joined the administration there in 1989, as an associate dean. He came a year later, and we had our first date in December of that academic year. Of course, I thought he was extraordinarily handsome. He was the hip English professor-type, and the students loved him. Our personalities just meshed; I feel lucky that we met.

Arches: You and Ron were both administrators at Trinity. Did you ever consider pursuing a university presidency?

MT: I loved being dean of students, but I had absolutely no aspirations to become a university president. Ron’s such a great people person that he’s a much better fit for that role. When he decided that was a path he wanted to pursue, we talked about the implications it would have for me. I knew if he realized his dream, it would be very difficult for me to continue my career. I was at peace with that. I am at peace with that. I may not have an official title, but I know he considers me a valuable part of the Puget Sound team. We both love this university, and I do everything I can to support him and his vision for it.

Arches: What attracted the two of you to Puget Sound?

MT: There were certain places I knew I wouldn’t go, parts of the country where I didn’t want to move. When he told me he had been recruited for this job, I was as excited as he was. I told him, “Now, that you can do. I can live there.”

I don’t remember much about Tacoma from my youth, but that’s fine because, from what I understand, Tacoma today is much different than it was 30 years ago. We really appreciate the city’s culture and charm and accessibility. It’s become a really vibrant area.

As far as the university itself goes, I love that it’s a small school that provides a high-quality, hand-crafted education. I think the faculty and staff are outstanding, and I’m proud that, as small as Puget Sound is, it plays an important part in the greater Tacoma area.

Arches: You serve on the boards of the Museum of Glass, Northwest Sinfonietta, and Tacoma Public Library Foundation. How did
you decide these were the three organizations to which you wanted to devote your time and energy?

**MT:** I didn’t rush into anything. I really thought about the causes I wanted to support, and I made my decisions with the realization that I wasn’t simply representing myself but rather the university as well.

The Museum of Glass is such a vital part of the renaissance of the city of Tacoma that I wanted to be part of that. Northwest Sinfonietta was founded by [UPS adjunct music professor] Christophe Chagnard, so that connection made it a natural. And the library was an obvious choice because, as a student and teacher, I hope the book will never be threatened. I want to do what I can to make books available to all residents, to make the library an exciting place to be.

All three boards are really pleasurable, but I won’t lie: they’ve brought with them a good deal of work and have forced me to tap into previously unknown skills. I chaired the search committee for the new director at the Museum of Glass; that really intensified my relationship with board members and staff there. On the other hand, the administrator side of my personality thrives on discussing processes and growth strategies.

**Arches:** Considering your home is located right on campus, do you ever feel like you live in a “glass house?”

**MT:** It’s not like that, really. People are very respectful and protective of our privacy. I can see the campus from our windows, but I never feel like we’re on stage. It’s actually a little secluded. We’ve had a few students knock on the door and ask to see the house, but I think that was driven by curiosity rather than the desire to intrude.

**Arches:** You attend a lot of dinners and receptions on behalf of the university. How demanding is the social aspect of your role as first lady?

**MT:** It’s busy but not much different than when we were at Trinity and Ron was acting president and I was dean of students. It’s not unusual for us to spend four of five weeknights entertaining at the house or attending dinners in the community.

I believe that’s an obligation we have—to reach out to students, staff, and faculty, as well as to like-minded organizations. It’s an obligation, but it’s also a pleasure. Of course, we’ve only been here three years. I’m not sure this is a pace we can maintain for the long run. Check back with me in a couple years and see if I’m still smiling when I talk about it.

**Arches:** You’re often spotted attending Puget Sound athletic events. Is that an obligation?

**MT:** I love going to women’s soccer games and football, because those are sports I really enjoy; they’re exciting for me. Ron adores athletics, so he drops in on basketball games and swim meets. We also enjoy the concerts and plays, but if we went to everything our lives would be completely consumed. We try to do as much as we can, and I think people appreciate it when we show up at those events, but I also think they understand everyone has limits.

**Arches:** Is it possible to get away from the demands of Ron’s job?

**MT:** We love to travel, but his schedule doesn’t allow for much of that—unless we can take an extra day or two for ourselves when he goes to a meeting. In June we were able to go to Venice to celebrate our 15th wedding anniversary. That was fabulous.

The two of us love to go to Primo Grill for dinner; Sea Grill, Asado, and Pacific Grill are other favorites. If we have a night without an event and we don’t feel like cooking, those are the kinds of places we sneak off to.

**Arches:** Is there anything you can tell us about President Thomas that we might not know?

**MT:** No. The person he is in public is the same person he is behind closed doors. He’s gregarious, and he absolutely loves meeting people and hearing their stories.

**Arches:** What about you? What would our readers be surprised to learn about you? Do you have vices you’re willing to confess?

**MT:** I’m pretty boring, really. Even my bad habits aren’t worth writing about. It may be surprising to people to learn that I love to cook and think about food. I have every *Gourmet* magazine dating back to 1978. OK, as I say that, I realize it’s a little strange. Let’s just say I thoroughly enjoy good food and wine.

**Arches:** You’re an experienced administrator. Any chance you’ll someday take an official position at Puget Sound?

There were certain places I knew I wouldn’t go, parts of the country where I didn’t want to move. When he told me he had been recruited for this job, I was as excited as he was. I told him, “Now, that you can do. I can live there.”

**MT:** I think it’s awkward for someone to work at an institution where their spouse is president, and I think it would be a conflict for me to be at another university. I don’t know. As difficult as it was to adjust to this new life, I’ve come to love the luxury of setting my own schedule.

I enjoy the opportunity to co-advising the university’s Mortar Board chapter. That helps me stay in touch with students and faculty, and that’s what I really miss about my former position.

I’m smart enough to know you should never say never, but at this point I really don’t see myself taking on another administrator position.

**Arches:** So, is Puget Sound the school from which you and Ron plan to retire?

**MT:** We certainly aren’t thinking about retiring yet; we feel like we’ve only just gotten started and have a lot more to do. We like to think we’ll be here as long as we have something to offer—for many years, we hope. We do love it here, and we just try to do the best we can every day to make this the best university it can be.