

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Thomas Samuels, NBDA President

“Bringing Diversity to Disney”

By Ernest E. Garrett III

Thomas Samuels made history when featured in a commercial as a part of Disney’s efforts to attract diverse groups of people to experience Disney Parks. This commercial, which first aired on February 19, 2007, will continue to air until May 9, 2007. Tune your channels to *Soul Food*, *Friends*, *BET*, and other prime time shows to witness your NBDA President in the role of “grandpa!”

What follows is the transcript of an interview between Ernest Garrett III and Thomas Samuels, which highlights his experiences in bringing diversity to Disney Parks worldwide.

Garrett: How did you hear about the Disney African-American advertising and marketing campaign?

Samuels: I saw the advertisement via the internet and several of my friends informed me about it and encouraged me to audition for the “grandfather” role.

Garrett: What made you decide to become involved and please tell us more about the process of your involvement.

Samuels: When I first saw the advertisement for a deaf grandfather role, I was not interested because I was overwhelmed with tasks related to NBDA business. A few days later, I received several calls from deaf friends encouraging me - including my wife - to audition for the role. After auditioning for the role, the casting director informed me Disney would contact me in the next few days if chosen. The next day I received an email from Disney Production informing me of my selection and their desire to fly me out to LA the next day. They also invited my wife.

Garrett: Which city did you go to for filming your part of the segment and please tell us more about the family you are portraying.

Samuels: The shooting for the commercial took place in the Famous Hollywood Center Studio in Los Angeles, California. I met my ‘commercial family’, which included my grandson, his stand-in (back-up), his father, mother and sister. I was the only deaf person in the family.

Garrett: Did the people you met already know of NBDA and was this a great public relations opportunity for you to share with them about NBDA?

Samuels: *Yes - The family of Isaiah Stuard who played my grandson and DJ Hamilton his stand-in knew about NBDA. David Hamilton, the father of DJ, is a deaf basketball star and the vice-president of the United States of America Deaf Basketball, Inc. (USADB). We knew each other and were happy to see each other again.*

During our free time, David and I discussed how USADB and NBDA could work together to provide leadership, education, and empowerment for young Black Deaf people in sports. David and I will have a meeting during the USADB Tournament in Indianapolis from April 12-15, 2007. Ira Hendon, President of USADB will also attend.

Garrett: Can you tell us more about how the commercial producers met your communication needs as a deaf man throughout your involvement?

Samuels: *The commercial producers provided two RID certified interpreters during the shooting. I knew one of the interpreters, a member of the National Alliance of Black Interpreters, Inc. (NAOBI). We met while attending several NAOBI conferences. The Disney commercial directors, producers, make-up artist, lights, camera, and other staff persons were a joy to work with. We all had fun during the shooting.*

Garrett: Have others seen your commercial and if so, what has the response been?

Samuels: *The number of people who contacted me after they saw the commercial was unbelievable. I was surprised to hear from old friends I have not seen or heard from in almost 20 years. They all congratulated me on making the commercial and felt proud to see someone on TV that they knew. All responses that I received have been positive and inspiring, especially from NBDA members.*

Garrett: Overall, was this a positive experience for you and if so, do you see the possibility of working on this type of campaign in the future, or other campaigns?

Samuels: *Yes – Making this Disney commercial has been a positive experience that I will never forget. It is possible that this opportunity will pave a road for NBDA and Disney to work together in the future. One of my priorities as NBDA president is for NBDA and Disney to work together to create a Deaf Awareness Day/Week at Disney's two theme parks with discounts for Deaf and hard of hearing people and their families.*

Garrett: In your opinion, how can more Black Deaf Americans become involved in ensuring their representation among the black population in national media campaigns?

Samuels: *Black deaf people who are concerned about ensuring their representation should join the 'NBDA Team' to help fight today's battle. NBDA membership is open to everyone. They can check the NBDA website www.nbda.org to get information on NBDA and how to become a member.*



Tom and Celeste (wife) outside the building where the Disney commercial filming takes place.



The make-up artist works hard to make sure that Tom is ready for the cameras.



Lights...Camera...Action!



Tom chats with camera technicians during a scene break.
(See the interpreter standing on the left, side almost out of the picture?)