Staying Power

Lois Thome has spent 32 years earning Southwest Florida's trust—one story, one person at a time.

The line at a Harry Chapin Food Bank grocery distribution snakes some 100 people deep through a Fort Myers parking lot when WINK News anchor Lois Thome arrives. She threads through the queue with quiet purpose, looking for people willing to share their personal experiences with hunger in Southwest Florida. She stashes her phone and notebook, choosing first to simply connect person to person. "Hello. How are you? I'm Lois. It's nice to meet you."

Still very much a Wisconsin farmer's daughter, Lois' presence is understated—casual dress, minimal makeup, sparse equipment. No videographers were available this morning, so she'll do the recording herself on her phone. Attendees quickly warm to her, and soon, she's deep in conversation with a woman named Mary, who lost a daughter and is raising her grandchildren. The family relies on these Harry Chapin handouts to supplement their swollen grocery bill. Mary smiles, at ease confiding in Lois. As they load groceries into Mary's Buick, seem a little like two friends catching up.

At WINK, where she has anchored the evening news for an unprecedented 32 years, Lois built her career on the power of connection. Bigger stations came knocking over the years, promising loftier stories in larger markets, the typical trajectory for up-and-coming broadcasters. But Lois prefers a more intimate

Glass artwork by Peter Hermansson, located at Method & Concept

brand of journalism, a people-centric approach best accomplished when you both cover and belong to the same community.

"Local stories are the most important stories because they impact you every single day," she says. "National stories can be at arm's length. They're not going to change how you put your kids to bed at night or how you drive to work in the morning." National stories, she adds, may evoke empathy; local stories provoke action.

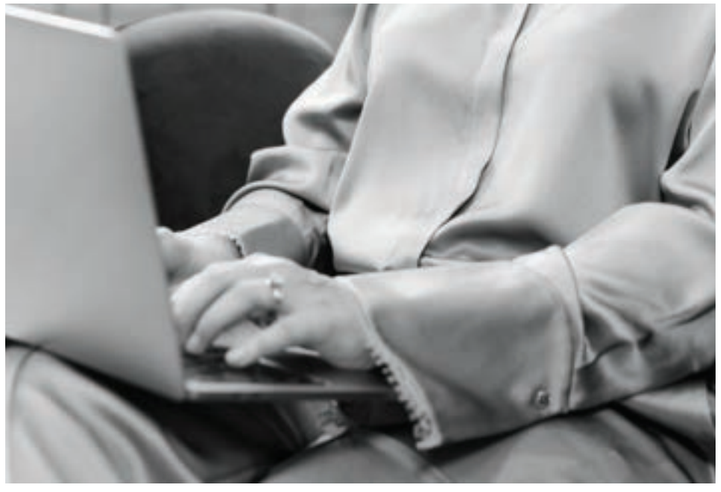
She's seen this neighborly mobilization unfold countless times, most dramatically in crises. During Hurricane Milton in October, a Fort Myers man called into the newsroom as his house flooded. On air, Lois and her co-anchor, Chris Cifatte, urged him to seek help. An urban search-and-rescue team watching the broadcast tracked the man down and brought him to safety.

Her work at the Harry Chapin event this morning represents a different type of journalistic public service. Lois has worked with the nonprofit, championing their cause since 2009. In 2021, when the pandemic forced the cancellation of the longtime WINK Feeds Families Hunger Walk, Lois helped launch WINK's March to a Million Meals—a month-long, on-air drive to provide 1 million meals for the food bank. Her interviews will run during this month's campaign, along with daily coverage from reporters she oversees for the project. Their aim is to reveal the realities, faces and systemic challenges of local food insecurity. The campaign's impact has been swift: In four years, they have raised $2.4 million—approaching the Hunger Walk's 11-year total of roughly $3.3 million.

The project exemplifies the type of grassroots, shoe-leather reporting that Lois likes best. "I love to just sit and talk and get to know (people) and have a shared experience," she says.

Lois inherited her gregariousness from her mother and honed it tending bar at a family-style restaurant in her 20s. She initiates

Helming the evening desk at WINK News since 1992, Lois is Southwest Florida's longest-standing anchor. Her longevity has fostered the kind of trust that only comes with time.



Lois spearheads Harry Chapin Food Bank and WINK News' month-long March to a Million Meals, running through February 28. The campaign aims to fund 1 million meals for neighbors in need. With its reporter-driven approach and heavy on-air presence, the drive has raised $2.4 million to fight food insecurity.

She champions an intimate form of journalism, centered on bridge-building and illuminating the nuanced stories in a community. "[Interviewing] a person … who has shared experiences with them, that's the most powerful thing you can do."

interviews in much the same way she engaged her patrons back then—minus the beer. "It starts with casual chit-chat that turns into more meaningful conversation," she says.

Her journalistic ethos crystallized during an assignment in 1994 in the Florida Keys. She spent three days embedded on a Coast Guard cutter, documenting as they picked up Cuban refugees who had fled the island by raft. One day, the crew intercepted a makeshift craft fashioned from tarps and old tires, the children hiding in a rudimentary compartment. Watching the family's forced return to Cuba, she tried to imagine the mother's anguish—an exercise in empathy she still practices with every interview. "It really resonated with me that it's about the real people in the stories," she says.

The reporter shifted her focus from newsmakers—elected officials, spokespeople, politicians—to those impacted by the news. She encourages young reporters to do the same. "[Interviewing] a person who looks like them, who's living like them, who has shared experiences with them—that's the most powerful thing you can do."

Lois' humanized stories on hunger shatter myths and misconceptions about who is affected and why. Mary's multigenerational household is a common situation. Further down the line, Lois interviews a woman who has multiple sclerosis and cannot work; her husband's income doesn't cover their expenses. Most families seeking food assistance include at least one working adult, Lois explains. She remembers one man, a retired engineer, who'd blown through his savings caring for his sick wife.

"Local stories are the most important stories," Lois says. "National stories can be at arm's length—they're not going to change how you put your kids to bed at night or how you drive to work in the morning." Local stories provoke action, she adds.

Hair and makeup: Dani Taverna, Duality Artistry
Styling: Erica Thebaud

Three decades on air helps open doors. "I watch you all the time!" shouts a woman in line; later, a food bank employee gushes that she's been watching Lois since childhood. Lois, who married a former WINK coworker and raised two children in Fort Myers, has never second-guessed her decision to stay put. "People know that I'm not just someone who shows up and reads the news every day. I'm also reading at church on Sunday, and I'm taking my kids to the football game," she says. "I'm, you know, the person you see at the grocery store shopping, just like everybody else does."

Still, not everyone will talk to Lois. She understands. She knows she's asking a lot of her subjects. "But in the end, the story can make a huge difference in a community," she adds. "It can change how people view things. It can change how governments govern."

In transient Southwest Florida, recognition is no guarantee. For every person who's grown up with Lois, there's a new arrival whose respect she must earn. "I don't get instant credibility just because I've been here over 30 years," she says. Historically low public trust in the media also limits Lois and her team, who face increasingly wary and skeptical sources. "I work very hard to take the 'I' and 'me' out of my reporting," she adds. The anchor extricates herself from stories that bleed into her personal life, keeps her opinions private, and limits social media to professional and charity posts.

Her deep community roots present challenges, too—keeping professional boundaries with could-be friends, managing the inevitable conflicts of interest, bumping into upset sources around town. She navigates these carefully, working with managers on sensitive stories and spending extra time with leery sources to build understanding.

But, for Lois, the occasional tensions pale against the capacity for good—a truth magnified as March to a Million Meals rallies the community this month. "I have this incredible platform that helps me improve my community; that helps me make a difference in the lives of other people, literally on a day-to-day basis."

Photographed in a Port Royal home