

Thomas

changed, but over the summer, she felt the urge to play softball once again.

“Whenever we lost our season to [the coronavirus] completely, it was just like, ‘Wow, it’s possible that I may never play another softball game again,’” Thomas recalled. “I did get closure, but at the same time, I felt like I wasn’t done.”

After talking with her high school softball coach, Dan Russell, and other trusted adults, including her father and her travel softball coach, Thomas announced her intention to walk onto one of the top teams in the Crossroads League – the Indiana Wesleyan University Wildcats.

“I feel like I have a pretty good shot,” Thomas said. “Of course, you never know what’s going to happen, but I

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*Alayna Thomas
Former Liberty
Christian star*

am thrilled that I have this opportunity, and if it works out in the end, I will be so grateful.”

Thomas graduated from Liberty this past spring as one of the most talented players to ever grace the softball diamond for the Lions. In her three seasons with the team, Liberty Christian went 38-25, and Thomas achieved star-status at multiple positions, including shortstop,

third base, and pitcher, where she set the school record for most wins in a single career.

“Playing at Liberty was such a huge blessing to me,” Thomas said. “It was, honestly, some of the most fun games of my life. So many good memories have come from that, and I was so blessed to be able to play with those girls. Not being able to play this last year because of COVID was heart-breaking for all of us, especially us seniors, but the three years I did have with them was amazing, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“She was very humble,” Russell said of his former star. “She knew she was our best player but handled it with a lot of humility better than a lot of kids would have. She was a tremendous

baserunner, and a great kid. She treated her teammates well...and they looked up to her. She’s just a really good kid.”

While Thomas could not play softball last spring, she was able to participate in travel softball over the summer and played in an exhibition doubleheader against city rival Anderson. During her first week of competition in June, Thomas said that she put together some stellar performances, and it was at that moment that she knew that she was not done playing softball just yet.

A short time later, Russell contacted IWU Head Coach, Steve Babinski, who encouraged Thomas to attend their softball camp in early August.

Thomas did so, using the time to get to know both the

coaching staff and her potential teammates.

It did not take long for the IWU softball program to leave an impression.

“I was just blown away,” Thomas said. “I loved Coach Babinski. Having conversations with him, whether it was about our faith, softball itself, or how academics worked at IWU, he’s just a really genuine person, and I appreciated that. That was what sold me on it.”

Over the next several weeks, Babinski and Thomas have agreed to a trial run, giving Thomas the chance to see if her busy school schedule will allow her to play softball for IWU on a full-time basis. Thomas will work out and meet with the team in an attempt to fully immerse herself into the program.

However, it seems that her

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mind is made up. She is ready to play for the Wildcats and ready to serve in any team role.

“I’m a utility player. I’ve got experience playing almost every position, including pitching,” Thomas said. “There’s a lot of potential no matter where you put me on the field. I can fill multiple roles, and anywhere Coach Babs would need me, I would be willing to go there and I’d be open minded about it.”

“They are getting a player that I’m sure, defensively, can play every position,” Russell concluded. “She’s a tremendous, all-around player with surprising power for her size. They are getting a really good player. If they give her a shot, she can help that program.”

Students

centage rate of student retention from freshmen to sophomore year, which is very encouraging.”

James Garringer, the veteran Director of Media Relations at Taylor, said he believes that all private Christian colleges are facing similar circumstances.

“We do not yet know the extent of the impact of Covid-19 at Taylor,” Garringer said. “We believe we will be off based on what we have heard from some of our students in terms of retention. Relative to the recruitment of first-time freshmen, we may be down a little as well, but we are dealing with the same thing

that IWU, Huntington, Anderson, Wheaton and the other small Christian private schools are navigating.”

When spring semester classes ended, enrollment at Taylor stood at 1,850 students, and enrollment on IWU’s Marion campus was reported at 3,165 students.

Since students were sent home in March, administrators at the two universities have been working diligently on plans to reopen the two campuses. The in-depth, detailed plans along with lists of frequently asked questions are posted on the IWU and Taylor websites.

“The entire IWU team is

collaborating across campus to provide a safe return for all students,” Castelman said. “The well-being of our students and the Marion community is central to our strategy.”

The biggest change for both universities is the fall semester calendar, with classes beginning in August and ending during Thanksgiving week. Previously, classes started on Labor Day weekend and ended a week before Christmas.

As expected, there are other similarities in the reopening plans for Taylor and IWU. For example:

While some colleges are assigning students to individual residence hall rooms, most IWU and Taylor students will continue to have roommates. Special accommodations will be considered for students who request a single room.

Most students will attend classes in person, but accommodations will be made for people who request to take online classes.

There will be no self-service for students in dining halls; a staff member will serve all food.

Chapel services, which an IWU memo refers to as “an essential part of the students’ journey,” will continue but with a revised format in which not all students will gather at the same time in the same place.

Students on both campuses have been told to bring a thermometer so they can regularly check their temperatures.

Should a student test positive for the Covid-19 virus while on campus, the preferred protocol is for the student to return home. If that is not possible, both campuses have set aside

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quarantine space.

Neither university will restrict students from engaging in activities within the Marion and Grant County community nor will community members be restricted from visiting the campuses. IWU, however, is not currently hosting non-IWU related gatherings such as conferences or banquets.

Both universities are continuing to review guidelines for student organizations and for fall sporting, many of which are governed by non-university athletic conferences.

IWU students, in an effort to help them remember a few safeguards, are being asked to adopt the “Wildcat Safe Seven Principles.” They include:

Wildcats Take Care of Wildcats: Always demonstrate kindness and respect while navigating anxious moments.

Always Wear Your Facial Covering: This applies to all students, employees, staff and visitors.

Wash Your Hands Frequently: This includes cough etiquette.

Clean and Sanitize: Students must clean rooms and bathrooms on a regular basis. Employees must sanitize workspaces and common spaces daily.

Stay at Least Six Feet Apart: Guidelines will be strictly enforced.

Monitor Your Health Everyday: Students showing Covid-19 symptoms should isolate from others and seek medical evaluation.

Have Questions? Reach Out! For health questions and information on safe practices, contact the IWU Health Center.

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