



New children's book collection bears boxing great's name

JAMES PRICHARD, Associated Press Writer. Associated Press. New York: Dec 3, 2006. pg. 1

BERRIEN SPRINGS, Mich. (AP) — Muhammad Ali used to recite poems before his fights that brashly predicted victory against his ring opponents, but boxing's poet laureate had to overcome dyslexia as a child to learn how to read and write.

A new classroom collection of children's books bearing Ali's name is intended to help motivate and empower young students, particularly boys, to overcome a different kind of obstacle to becoming accomplished readers: disinterest.

Scholastic Corp.'s "Muhammad Ali Presents Go the Distance" features books that champion Ali's values and are aimed at socially disadvantaged students in grades 3-8 who believe neither reading nor education is relevant to their lives, says Lonnie Ali, the boxing legend's wife.

"The foundation of all education is reading," she says. "Books can take a child outside of his immediate vicinity, his immediate environment, to someplace else. It makes them learn about other communities outside of their immediate neighborhoods. That's one of the things this particular library has been designed to do: to take children on that next journey out."

The collection includes a wide range of multicultural fiction and nonfiction books that generally reflect the interests of young boys in underserved classrooms because, on average, they read far less than their female counterparts.

"A lot of it has to do with subject material — getting the interest of the child, to make them read," Ali says. "The more you make a child read, the more they are motivated. The more motivation they have, the more they seek out books to read and the more they become empowered by what they read and empowered with what they can do."

Some of the titles in the collection include: "Stealing Home: The Story of Jackie Robinson," about the legendary athlete who broke baseball's color barrier; "Hunterman and the Crocodile," a folk tale from west Africa; "White Star: A Dog on the Titanic," about a young boy and a dog who bond while aboard the doomed ocean liner; and "Touching Spirit Bear," a story of a young boy's journey from self-destructive anger to forgiveness.

The collection wouldn't be complete without an Ali book, so Scholastic also included "The Champ: The Story of Muhammad Ali."

Many boys would rather spend time playing video games than reading books, says Ali, who does most of the public speaking on behalf of her 64-year-old husband these days because of his Parkinson's disease.

"You don't see boys carrying around a book, reading it, anymore, like you used to," she says. "You barely see girls do it."

The "Going the Distance" books convey such ideals held by her husband as building confidence, showing determination, finding mentors and offering and earning respect. The project was about two years in the making and was launched Nov. 10.

"I know for a fact that if boys are given materials that they are interested in reading, they will read it. That's why this came about," Ali says while relaxing in the business office on the couple's sprawling 88-acre estate in Berrien Springs, about 170 miles west of Detroit.

“Not every child comes to school on the same playing field. Some of them have reading challenges, some of them have handicaps of some sort, but it’s important that they know you can still achieve greatness, no matter what.”

The collection includes three libraries for grades 3-4, 5-6 and 7- 8, each with 96 books for students to read and discuss in class. There also are additional materials for teachers, such as printable lesson plans, book notes and a classroom poster of Muhammad Ali.

Akimi Gibson, vice president and publisher of classroom books at New York-based Scholastic, said the collection offers a mix of mostly contemporary titles from the publisher for “students who feel very disenfranchised from the educational process. In this particular program, we assembled books that speak to the realities students face every day.”

“Going the Distance” also introduces a new generation to the former boxer, which delights him immensely, his wife says.

Having Muhammad Ali’s name associated with the collection gives it instant credibility, says Francesann Lightsey, principal of the James M. Grimes Performing Arts Magnet School in Mount Vernon, N.Y. Under a pilot program, fifth-graders at the school started using the books about a month before the collection’s official launch.

“Sometimes parent involvement is a challenge, but Muhammad Ali is a common denominator between generations,” says Lightsey. “He bridges the gaps in a lot of ways for us. I’ll be able to get parents involved, and I think Scholastic will be able to develop this program far beyond what it currently is.”

More than 90 percent of the school’s student population are children of color, hailing mostly from Africa or the Caribbean islands, she says. They have connected with the culturally diverse book collection, which she describes as “very urban child friendly.”

Lightsey credits the books with, in just a few weeks, giving several boys at the school a completely different outlook on reading and education.

“Boys have a tendency, no matter where they’re from, to want to be powerful,” she says. “Boys kind of glamorize physical types of activities _ basketball, football, boxing. So to have a reading series that is presented by Muhammad Ali, it almost makes it OK to read because this really powerful, cool dude is saying, ‘It’s OK to read, it’s good to read.’ It brings about a different mind-set.”

On the Net:

Scholastic Corp.: <http://www.scholastic.com/>