

San Antonio Express-News

WEDNESDAY, MAY 4, 2005

Ali's wife tells inspiring story

Boxing champ and three of his children battled dyslexia.

BY JOHN WEISLER
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

The world knows Muhammad Ali as perhaps the greatest fighter of all time. But few people know of Ali's battles with dyslexia.

"He's fought it all his adult life," said his wife, Lonnie Ali. "It was only through perseverance that he learned to overcome it."

Tuesday night, 350 educators from across America gathered at the downtown Westin Hotel to hear the seldom-told story of Muhammad Ali's struggles with reading.

The gathering was part of the International Reading Association's annual conference on literacy and reading achievement that drew 22,000 to the Convention Center this week.

With her famous husband sitting silently by her side, Lonnie Ali told the audience how two of her husband's daughters from a previous marriage — as well as their 14-year-old son — struggled with reading the same as their father.

"Just because you have a problem reading doesn't mean you can't overcome it," Lonnie Ali said. "Muhammad is proof of that."

Ali, 63, suffers from Parkinson's disease. There is a shuffle



J. MICHAEL SHORT/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Muhammad Ali downs with Vincent Martinez, who playfully punches the former heavyweight champion on the nose. Martinez is part of the READ 180 program in the Judson School District.

in his step where he once floated "like a butterfly." His hand shakes and his speech is slow and unintelligible.

But Tuesday he smiled during his wife's speech and clapped as the names of a group of Judson School District students involved in a special reading program — READ 180, created by children's publishing, education and media company Scholastic Inc. — were read by Lonnie Ali.

After his wife's speech, Muhammad Ali shook each student's hand. Karisha McClinton, 13, a seventh-grader at Kirby

Middle School, the only girl in the group, even got a hug.

"I was shocked," she said. "Muhammad Ali? I didn't really know much about him, but my mom was like, 'He was cute and he was a good fighter.'"

Donnie Sullivan, 16, a junior at Judson High School, said meeting Muhammad Ali "was all good."

"He's one of my favorite boxers," Sullivan said. "I've seen a lot of his old fights on TV."

Afterward, everyone in attendance got to come up on stage to get a picture taken with "The

Greatest."

A playful Ali calmly sat in a chair, throwing a mock kiss to the ladies and holding his fingers to form rabbit ears behind some of the men.

Kelly Carpenter, a ninth- and 10th-grade remedial reading teacher from Philadelphia, was so excited she tried to reach her fiancée on her cell phone.

"I couldn't wait to tell him I was getting my picture taken with Muhammad Ali," Carpenter said. "But he didn't answer."

jwhisler@express-news.net