

Class Act Ali Shows School Kids The Ropes

BY MICHAEL KATZ

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MUHAMMAD ALI became a substitute teacher yesterday and the lessons were love your neighbor - and be sure to duck.

A two-bus caravan taking Ali and Friends to two area high schools yesterday spread the good words. But Bus No. 2, obviously at least 10-foot-3-inches tall, ignored the sign warning that the clearance beneath the railroad trestle was 10-feet-2 inches, and was stuck yesterday with Roy Jones Jr. on the intersection of Hoyt and Fenimore in Mamaroneck.

Someone asked Ali, in Bus No. 1 right behind, to work his magic, maybe do one of the levitation tricks he performed the night before at the West Side apartment of his co-author, Thomas Hauser. Instead, Mamaroneck firefighters handled the problem. Bus No. 1 backed up and employes at the Saxony Ice and Equipment Co. who had checked out the disturbance were left wondering until the 6 o'clock news whether that was really Muhammad Ali they had seen in a bus in the middle of nowhere.

Ali's magic explained why two busloads of Time Warner do-gooders and media bystanders were there in the first place. That and the other signs in Mamaroneck. The ones painted on several homes, early in the year and again last month, the night before Rosh Ha-Shana. Signs like, "Kill All the Jews" and "Jews Go Home." "It shook the community," said Ross Greenburg, executive producer of Time Warner Sports and a Jew who was already home in Mamaroneck. Greenburg said the community rallied with a "march of solidarity." But, truth be told, it was another Jew, Hauser, who got the world's most famous Muslim there yesterday.

Hauser graduated from Mamaroneck High 33 years ago and just so happened to help his collaborator with a subject dear to Ali's heart. The bus tour stopped at two contrasting schools, first A. Philip Randolph High smack dab in the middle of Harlem, then Mamaroneck High in the lap of suburban luxury. Randolph shatters stereotypes of inner-city schools, many of its students going on to Ivy League educations. Time Warner has worked with it as a "cable in the classroom" school. At both institutions, all students were to receive copies of the slim but classy \$9.95 Ali-Hauser book, "Healing," subtitled "A journal of tolerance and understanding." Students were also asked to compete in an HBO art contest to illustrate "Healing."

The runner-up at Randolph was a young lady, Nina Bowen, 16, who has scholarships to Harvard, Cornell and Columbia waiting, one advisor said. She and the Randolph winner, Towanda Mathurin, 17, got to kiss Ali. When they also kissed Jones, Ali played hurt. Jones, the current conscience of boxing and never mind whether he is the best fighter in the world "pound for pound," as he has a right to proclaim. He is "a man who defines class," said Time Warner Sports chief Seth Abraham. Jones missed the plane for the gathering at Hauser's the night before, missed hearing Ali sing along with rock legend Lloyd Price on "Personality" and "Stagger Lee" at least the parts Ali remembered.

Another Time Warner ring star, Marco Antonio Barrera of Mexico, skipped schools yesterday because he missed his flight. "What is it about fighters and catching planes?" Jones asked rhetorically. Jones didn't miss the boat. At Randolph, he told the kids how, at the age of 5, he began boxing. "And it started right there," he said, pointing at Ali. More, he stressed that "any person, any color, can come to me and as long as you're doing something positive, you're on my team." At Mamaroneck, he took on hubris: "Some guys, like Mike Tyson, get to that spot and God knock 'em back to keep them humble." The kids applauded. "I think it did Roy a lot of good hanging around Ali," said Hauser. "He seemed to take his role more seriously, and certainly more dangerously."

Ali's magical bus tour began at Randolph. He still can make an entire room, with 1,500 students, levitate. None of the students, of course, personally remembers Smokin' Joe Frazier, Sonny Liston, George Foreman or Ali's fight against the Vietnam War. Most of the teachers were also too young. But there was still the familiar chant of "Ali, Ali" as the assembly greeted his entrance. "I've seen tapes of his fights and I remember what he stood for," said Courtney St. Paix, 26, a chemistry teacher at Randolph. "He's still magic." Magic is getting President Clinton to send faxes to both schools for this "memorable and meaningful program." Magic is getting Time Warner, underwriting the junket, to allow Fox cameras on the bus, a rare sign of tolerance in the duel between the TV giants. Magic is getting a phys ed teacher, Jim Codispoti, 55, standing in the back of the assembly at Mamaroneck, remembering that maybe he didn't think Ali was right about Vietnam, not then, but "regardless of how I felt, I respected him." Magic is Ali in effect becoming a substitute teacher that the kids don't disrespect.

Both schools played the same song, "The Greatest Love of All," for him. A young Randolph pianist, Omar Johnson, and a 23-piece big band at Mamaroneck. The band finished much quicker, but Ali teaches not to look at differences. "He teaches us how to love," said Hauser. Lonnie Ali, his wife, said "Muhammad never turned down an autograph, a handshake or a smile." Ali's mind is as sharp as ever. His brain inhibits many of his motor reflexes, such as speech and movement. The Mouth is mostly silent now, but at 54, he is happily embarking on what Mamaroneck principal James Coffey, called Ali's "biggest fight, against intolerance." He is not armed the way he once was, able to "float like a butterfly and sting like a bee." With his speech impaired by Parkinson's Syndrome, the one-liners have been reduced to almost one-word witticisms.

The night before, when Lonnie left Hauser's apartment, Ali playfully looked over the room at the pretty women among the 15 or so guests and said, "Freedom." At Mamaroneck, when a student asked how he, in his prime, would have done against Tyson, Ali's normally weak voice could be heard at the back of the assembly hall: "No problem." When the kids gave him an A. Philip Randolph High T-shirt, he managed to get out, "I came all the way here and I work this hard and this is all I get?" He's not going to get rich on a \$9.95 book whose royalties are split with Hauser. So give him three cheers: "Ali, Ali, Ali."