

OPINION

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Champion Boxer, Activist and World Icon

Muhammad Ali was my idol

BY MARC H. MORIAL

How would you approach the colossal task of describing a man who once boasted that he, “wrestled with alligators, tussled with a whale, done handcuffed lightning and throw thunder in jail. Only a man you allow to define himself—in his own colorful words—which is what Muhammad Ali did his entire life and throughout his legendary boxing career.

Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. was born where he was buried: Louisville, Kentucky. His mother was a cook and house cleaner and his father was a frustrated painter with big dreams, dreams he would pass on to both his sons along with this constant refrain—“I am the greatest.”

Ali’s legendary boxing career began with a beloved, stolen bicycle. The \$60 red Schwinn was a Christmas gift from his father, and it would set the wheels in motion for an angry 12-year-old kid



who claimed he would “whup” the person who stole his bike, to step into a ring, pick up boxing gloves and fight for justice. It was a defining moment and a trope that would shape his professional and personal life.

Ali was a great fighter, but his fights were never limited to the inside of a boxing ring. Ali’s career was teeming with personal success, but every win in and out of the ring was a win for every man or woman who ever felt attacked, or had to bob and weave past the ferocious jabs of social injustice. Ali was a professional athlete, but he used that platform to make an impact that transcended pugilism. Famous people often take up causes, but Ali is the greatest because he stood up for his principles and made consequential sacrifices on behalf of those causes.

After winning a gold medal in the Rome Olympics and beating Sonny Liston for the heavyweight championship, the newly crowned 22-year-old champ renounced his given name, Cassius Clay, as a “slave name” and revealed that he was a member of the Nation of Islam. His new faith and his

new name drew intense controversy and lost him many fans, but he persevered and successfully defended his title every time he stepped in the ring.

In 1967, Ali was drafted to serve in the Army during the height of our nation’s war in Vietnam. He refused to serve, saying, “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong,” and requested conscientious-objector status from fighting against people he said never lynched him or put dogs on him. No slight of hand in the ring, head fake or lightening quick shuffle was as bold as Ali’s refusal to fight in a war he did not believe in. The reaction was swifter and harder than the punches of any opponent Ali had ever faced. Many called him a traitor. Ali was convicted of draft evasion, stripped of his heavyweight title and banned from boxing. While he wasn’t locked up for sticking to his conviction, he was locked out of the sport the brought him to fame. He sacrificed four years of his career and untold millions rather than renounce his anti-war stance.

Ali would return to the ring in 1970 and would go on to thrill boxing fans, supporters, and crit-

ics, with his skill in the ring. Loud and unapologetic, Ali would continue to speak out against social injustice and preach the gospel of Black pride. Never forgetting those who were still “catching hell” while he had it made, Ali understood that “service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.” The 12-year-old boy who lost his bike at the hands of an unknown thief may have changed his name, but never wavered from his purpose: to seek justice. His fight for justice was never his alone; it was for everyone.

It was during this period of his career that I, a star-struck 13-year-old, was thrilled to meet Ali at an Alpha Phi Alpha convention in Milwaukee. I was awed by him have considered him a hero all my life. One of my prized possessions is an autographed Ali boxing glove, a cherished wedding gift from my wife. Later, I was honored to serve as an Ali Center Board Member for several years.

Ali laid his gloves down for the last time in 1980. After retiring, he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. As the progressive condition robbed him of his poetry,

stinging provocations and physical dexterity, he became a more cherished figure, here and abroad, and the accolades poured in for breadth of Ali’s career as a boxer and activist.

He was the first boxer on a box of Wheaties. He lit the Olympic flame during the Atlanta Olympics. President Bush presented Ali with the Medal of Freedom, and the National Urban League honored Ali with the highest commendation presented by the organization by giving him an Equal Opportunity Day Award.

He was my idol and his courage has been a beacon for so many in my generation.

Ali fought his last battle against his most vicious foe in the public eye for over 30 years. While we mourn the time of his departure, we are reminded of what made him “the greatest of all time.” We should all draw comfort from knowing that he competed well. We take pride in the fact that he finished the race. And we recognize that we are all better because he kept the faith. Rest in peace, champ.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive of the National Urban League.

Blaming People for their Own Poverty is a Myth

The illusion goes back centuries

BY JILL RICHARDSON

If you’re poor, many Americans think, it’s your own fault. It’s a sign of your own moral failing.

I don’t personally believe that, but the idea has roots in our culture going back centuries.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, the foundational work of modern cap-

italism, Adam Smith extolled the virtues of working hard and being thrifty with money. That wasn’t just the way to get rich, he reasoned — it was morally righteous.

Sociologist Max Weber took the idea further in describing what he called the Protestant work ethic.

To Puritans who believed that one was either predestined for heaven or for hell, Weber wrote, working hard and accumulating wealth was a sign of God’s blessing. Those

who got rich, the Puritans thought, must have been chosen by God for heaven; those who were poor were damned.

Even major American philanthropists have subscribed to this idea.

John D. Rockefeller, a religious Baptist, thought his extraordinary wealth was evidence from God of his righteousness. Fortunately, he took this as a sign that he should use his money for good. He gave it to universities and medical research centers, and his descendants used it for great art museums, national parks, and more.

But Rockefeller also believed that the poor were often deserving of their fate. If they’d just worked harder or budgeted their money wisely, then they wouldn’t be poor.

Plenty of Americans agree. Sadly, that’s often not the case.

The first factor determining one’s wealth as an adult is an accident of birth. If you’re born to wealthy parents, you’ll go to better schools and get better health care. Your odds of success as an adult are higher.

If, on other hand, you’re born

to poor parents who must work multiple jobs instead of staying home to care for you — or who can’t afford healthy food, medical care, or a house in a good school district — your chances of earning your way into the middle class as an adult plummet.

In fact, if your parents’ income is in the bottom 20 percent, there’s a 40 percent chance you’ll be stuck in that low-income bracket for your entire life. Thanks to racism, that figure rises to 50 percent for black people born into poverty.

Indeed, racial disparities crop up even at the bottom of the ladder.

Due to historic racism and discrimination, data from the Economic Policy Institute shows, low-income white families tend to be wealthier than black families making the same income. Furthermore, whites are more likely to have friends and family who can help them out of a financial bind.

Finally, thanks to decades of discriminatory housing and lending practices, black families are more likely to live in poorer neighborhoods. That impacts the quality of the schools they attend,

among many other things.

So why can’t a hardworking family get ahead? For one thing, it’s expensive to be poor.

Try finding an affordable place to live. You need to have enough cash on hand to pay a deposit. Many apartments require you to prove your income is 2.5 times the cost of the rent.

Public assistance programs only help the most destitute, and often don’t provide enough even then.

For the disabled, the situation is worse. In theory, Social Security provides for those with disabilities. In reality, getting approved for disability payments is costly (in both medical and legal fees) and difficult. Once you get approved, disability payments are low, condemning you to poverty for life.

In short, there are many reasons why poor Americans are poor. It doesn’t help that our society thinks it’s their own fault.

OtherWords columnist Jill Richardson is the author of Recipe for America: Why Our Food System Is Broken and What We Can Do to Fix It.

The Law Offices of
Patrick John Sweeney, P.C.

Patrick John Sweeney
Attorney at Law

1549 SE Ladd, Portland, Oregon

Portland: (503) 244-2080

Hillsboro: (503) 244-2081

Facsimile: (503) 244-2084

Email: Sweeney@PDXLawyer.com