

AN AFTERNOON WITH “THE GREATEST”

During the summer of 2009 I received a call from my son-in-law inviting me to accompany him in touring the recently opened Muhammed Ali Museum. Also with us was his son Johnny, who at the time was only eleven months old. As a lifelong resident of Louisville, Kentucky I had followed the life of Muhammed Ali as he evolved from heavyweight boxer into perhaps the most recognized personality in the world. Visiting the museum was an opportunity to gain additional perspective into Ali’s unique and remarkable life.

As we toured the museum we saw countless news stories about Ali on display. We read a story written the day after he first won the heavyweight boxing title from Sonny Liston. We read about his decision to embrace the Muslim faith. We perused stories about his decision not to enter military service and the subsequent fallout that resulted both nationally and for Ali personally. And we read about Ali regaining his boxing title and from there becoming an internationally renowned personality. Yet there was another aspect of the Ali story that we would get to experience. For my son-in-law, my grandson and I were about to meet “The Greatest” in person.

While we were on the third floor of the museum a fellow visitor indicated that he thought Muhammed Ali was on the premises. Within five minutes after that we encountered Ali, accompanied by his wife Lonnie and his sister-in-law. They were headed to the museum theater room on the second floor where visitors could watch film of his various title fights. Upon encountering us, Lonnie extended an invitation to accompany them to the theater room. Surprised and pleased as to the invitation, we and approximately a dozen other visitors followed the Ali family to the theater area.

As we walked to the theater I was struck by a number of things I observed as to Muhammed Ali. At 67 years of age he was limited in his movements by Parkinson’s Disease, yet at the same time he still had the forearms of a young man. Though his face seemed to have a blank look, his eyes were actively taking in what was going on around him. There was no entourage—he was accompanied solely by family. And I found it ironic that while as a young man he communicated through bravado in a violent sport, as an older man he was communicating a message of inclusiveness simply by his presence and persona. Words were not needed. For, while the body of Muhammed Ali may have been weakened, it was also allowing his strength of spirit to shine through.

At the theater Ali sat in a lounge chair and watched film from his 1966 title fight with Cleveland Williams while one of the other visitors provided commentary. At the same time my grandson Johnny was at the nearby scale size boxing ring pulling himself up on the ropes and scooting himself around. While Ali was interested in the fight film I could also see his eyes intently watching Johnny as he traveled along the ropes, as this was a man who was known for his love of children. After the fight film concluded an opportunity was extended for Johnny to have his picture taken with Muhammed Ali. Though the photo

my son-in-law took did not come out as clearly as we would have liked, it was still on record that on this summer afternoon in 2009 my grandson Johnny had spent an afternoon with "The Greatest."

Fast forward to the spring of 2016 and Johnny Willen is a first grade student at a Louisville public school. He has been given the class assignment of making a poster about a famous American. It goes without saying as to the famous American he picked. Included in the poster is a copy of the picture taken with Muhammed Ali when Johnny was but eleven months old. The caption beside the photo simply reads like this:

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee--

Picture of Johnny with Muhammed Ali."