

Boxer promotes plans for center honoring his life

By Bruce Schreiner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Muhammad Ali still has a flair for the dramatic.

Ali came home last Wednesday bearing a gift for a yet-to-be-built center dedicated to his boxing career and humanitarian causes outside the ring.

The three-time heavyweight boxing champion donated the first exhibit — the torch he carried to light the Olympic flame as a worldwide audience watched the start of the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta.

The torch will be followed by other mementos from his remarkable boxing career, but Ali's wife said the Muhammad Ali Center will advance more important themes — such as racial tolerance, peace and human

dignity. Lonnie Ali said their goal for the center is to inspire people, especially children, to reach their potential and to show tolerance and respect for others, no matter their skin color or beliefs.

"The Muhammad Ali Center will provide a place where the values and virtues that he represents can come together to continue the inspiration that his life has already given to ... people to pursue their own potential and greatness," she said. "But this center will not be about his fame. Muhammad does not want that. It is about values rather than fame."

Lonnie Ali said they hope the center will be a place of reflection and study for a cross-section of visitors — from teachers developing curriculum to promote

tolerance, to humanitarians working to resolve world hunger.

"Some people may come to the center because of Muhammad's celebrity," she said. "But we will try to ensure that by the time they leave, that they will have learned as much about themselves as they have about Muhammad."

Ali, afflicted with Parkinson's disease, a degenerative nerve disease, made no formal comments during the news conference Wednesday near the site for the proposed museum. But he interacted with a group of school children sitting near the former boxing champion.

The Ali Center would include a museum, exhibits, a research center, an auditorium and a garden. It

would be built downtown near the Ohio River, where Ali is reputed to have thrown his 1960 Olympic gold medal in protest of racial injustice.

Organizers want to raise \$80 million for the long-anticipated project — \$60 million to design and build the center, plus \$20 million for an endowment to pay for its operation. Organizers hope to open the center on Jan. 17, 2001, Ali's 59th birthday.

The Alis plan to move back to Louisville from Berrien Springs, Mich., to help oversee development and operation of the center, Lonnie Ali said.

Political leaders lined up to pay tribute to Ali — whom they called the most recognizable man on the planet.

Louisville Mayor Jerry

Abramson said the Ali Center would be "a very unique place for a very unique man." He said it would become a world attraction, but that its meaning would go far beyond tourist dollars.

"It's not just Ali's victories in the ring that will be captured at this center," Abramson said. "But it will be as much about the causes for which the champ fought outside the ring — equal rights, tolerance, peace in the world, respect for other human beings — that will be expounded upon and taught at this center."

Gov. Paul Patton pledged support to raise money — both public and private — to build the museum. Patton said the center should be built "on a scale that is commensurate with Muhammad Ali's

impact on the world."

Businessman Larry Townsend, who heads the Ali Center board, said afterwards that construction wouldn't begin until all the money is raised.

Townsend said he had commitments from private and public donors for about half of the \$80 million, and that he hoped construction could begin by mid- to late 2000. The Ali Center board has attracted some heavyweight members, including Dick Ebersol, chairman of NBC Sports; Seth Abraham, president and CEO of HBO's Time Warner Sports; and former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo.

Designer of the Ali Center will be the Lee H. Skolnick Architecture Design Partnership, a New York firm.

New York artist paints imagined history of U.S. slavery

By Sara Silver

NEW YORK (AP) — It took Mary Whitfield two years to paint a dead tree, and two more years to find the courage to hang a dead man from it. Since then she hasn't stopped.

Scenes of lynching dominate the dense watercolors of Whitfield, a self-taught artist who is haunted by suffering — both historic and contemporary — of blacks in the United States. She bases her work on stories passed down by her grandmother, which range from poignant tales of pastoral life to vivid accounts of slavery.

"I can have paintings of lynchings all over my wall. It doesn't frighten me. It just tells me that my ancestors'

story needs to be told in truth," says Whitfield, 51. "If it weren't for their suffering, I wouldn't be here, would I?"

Whitfield makes watercolor look like oil paint, brushing the canvas over and over to achieve rich, evocative browns for the leafless trees and dusky blues and oranges for screaming skies. White acrylic gives form to the flowing dresses and puffy head scarves of mourners.

Her characters have thin, featureless faces, and it is their dramatic gestures or inclined heads that draw the mostly flat figures — and the eye of the viewer — across the canvas.

Even in her tender scenes of children jumping rope, fields of sunflowers, or

mothers nestling babies, there is still a feeling of sadness.

"I tried to paint people happy, and I can't see how they can be happy," says the artist, who believes that economic injustice has replaced slavery as the main source of oppression for American blacks.

"The world is too cruel to black men, and if I knew that I wouldn't have had any children," says Whitfield, who has three sons.

Born in 1947, Whitfield spent her early years with her grandmother, who took her to civil-rights meetings and to church. She moved to the Long Island suburbs of New York City with her mother, and later married a hardware salesman. She supervised library services for a Long

Island company, and started painting with old house paint and plywood when her children were young.

In 1990, when her children were grown, Whitfield bought watercolors and canvas board, fueling an almost religious drive to give form to the imagined life of

her forebears.

Whitfield, whose works have sold for up to \$5,000, has been commissioned to do a children's book about her husband's life growing up with his eight brothers and sisters on a North Carolina farm.

"She gives an emotionally

powerful account of the quiet, steady bonding of a family going through daily life, which children can identify with," says Laura Godwin, Henry Holt and Co.'s associate publisher of books for young readers. "She creates a story that has the rhythm of an ongoing cycle."

Colorblind

(Continued from page 12) and U.S. Bank.

"Most of our Chamber businesses are committed to a diverse work force," Rich Sonstelle, chairman of Puget Sound Energy and chairman of the Chamber's board, told a Seattle newspaper, "and believe that affirmative action programs help provide a diverse, well-educated and trained pool of talent."

These business men and women have gotten the message: Affirmative action is good for America.

In a column I wrote about the passage of Proposition 209, I said that referendum wasn't the "wave of the future," as its supporters crowed.

Instead, it was the wave for the past — a past in which virtually all of the resources of the society were reserved for white men.

We've just this month been reminded of what the past looked like by looking — of all places — at the United States Supreme Court.

The NAACP sponsored a demonstration there Oct. 6 to protest the virtual exclusion of men and women of color from the important and prestigious positions of clerks to the Supreme Court Justices.

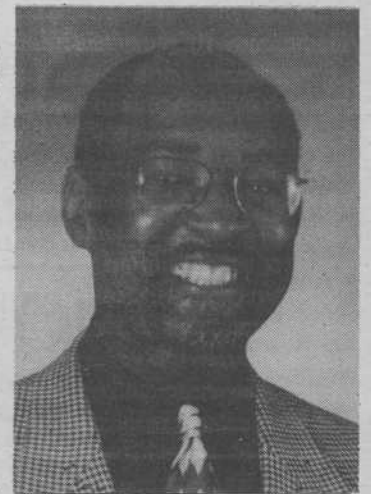
Of the 428 clerks hired over time by the nine sitting justices, less than 5 percent have been Asian-American, less than 2 percent have been African-American, 1 percent have been Hispanic-American, 25 percent have been white women and none have been Native-American. Among the Court's new class of 34 clerks, there is one person of color, a Hispanic-American woman.

Is this how the Supreme Court regards the universe of graduates of American law schools — that the most talented are virtually exclusively confined to those who look most like them?

In a brief comment which CBS News reported, Justice Antonin Scalia said the court's hiring practices are "scrupulously fair." And, no doubt, colorblind.

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