



Lonnie Ali, the widow of the late Muhammad Ali, poses for a portrait inside the exhibit in the Ali Center on Friday, Feb. 3, 2023, in Louisville, Ky.

Lonnie Ali's
**LEGACY
OF
LOVE**

*LONNIE ALI TALKS TO RANA ALSOUFI
ABOUT THE LIFE SHE HAS DEDICATED
TOWARD KEEPING HER LATE HUSBAND'S
LEGACY INTACT WHILE ALSO REFLECTING
ON THE LEGACY SHE WISHES TO CREATE
FOR HERSELF. PHOTOGRAPHED BY
MARTHA MCHANEY.*



LeRoy Neiman prints hang in the Ali Center's Neiman Gallery on Friday, Feb. 3, 2023, in Louisville, Ky.

On what would have been Muhammad Ali's 81st birthday, the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky, stood empty and quiet. The Center and all of its exhibitions had been closed off to the public, but Lonnie Ali, Muhammad's devoted wife, made her visit to the Center, which she co-founded with her husband in 2005, to reflect upon and remember his life. Many of the qualities she admired the most about Muhammad, such as his "golden heart" and his "infinite amount of patience," rushed to her memory on that important day.

"Muhammad would literally give you the last dime in his pocket and the shirt off his back. I'm being honest – he would," 66-year-old Lonnie said. "It's hard to be like that. And he never worried about having to replenish it or where's he going to get another one. He didn't care about that."

Rather than a painful reminder of what was lost to those who idolized and were close to him, Lonnie chooses to use Muhammad's birthday as an opportunity to remind herself of all the things she loved about him.

"Muhammad loved birthdays. Not the aging part – he loved the gifts part," Lonnie said with a smile. "I think today is an opportunity, what I think, to spread joy, to spread that... that... you can't even name it, really."

To Lonnie, the day is a chance to encourage others to be more like Muhammad and to give back to the community in Muhammad's honor. In Arizona, where Lonnie currently resides, homeless residents of St.

Vincent de Paul received home-cooked meals prepared by various local chefs in the late heavyweight boxing champion's memory.

"It's an opportunity to remember those who have been forgotten and to be kinder," Lonnie said. "To remind myself to be kinder, nicer to people in my encounters, to be more patient, more loving."

Lonnie's spirit and compassion are two qualities that come to the forefront of her personality, said WAVE 3 News TV and radio personality John Ramsey, who has been close friends with both Muhammad and Lonnie for over 35 years. He said that she shares those qualities with her late husband as well.

"There was a huge void in my life [after Muhammad died]. I can't imagine what it was like for her, but when Muhammad passed... I guess the way I always put this is I get my dose of Muhammad when I'm talking to Lonnie – that I remember him because they're so much alike," Ramsey said.

It is difficult to describe just how much love and admiration Lonnie holds in her heart for her late husband. From the day she first met Muhammad when she was only 6 years old – Muhammad 21 years old – in their neighborhood in Louisville, a unique and unbreakable bond formed between the two of them.

The young Lonnie recalled coming home from school one day and seeing every little boy in her neighborhood gathered around a man sitting on his porch across the street from her house. Her mother was peering out the

“...I think that’s really what legacies are about: you try to do the best you can do every day, try to *spread a little joy or happiness every day.*”

— LONNIE ALI
CO-FOUNDER OF THE MUHAMMAD ALI CENTER

window at them, and, curious as to what was going on, Lonnie asked her who the man was.

"That's Cassius Clay," her mother said.

Lonnie described him as having been "very conservatively dressed, very neat." She watched as all the boys around him listened to his every word with their eyes wide open, full of awe and wonder. Spotting her watching from the window of her house, Clay (his name before he converted to Islam in 1964 and changed it to Muhammad Ali) asked one of Lonnie's brothers, who was among the crowd of children, who she was. When he learned of Lonnie, he asked her brother to go and get her. Being the shy little girl that she was, Lonnie was hesitant to go and meet the man whom everyone seemed to be absolutely enthralled by. But she did, and the relationship between the pair evolved and only grew stronger over time.

When Lonnie turned 17, she knew then and there that

she was going to marry Muhammad Ali and spend the rest of her life with him.

"He was a mentor, like a big brother. Living in Louisville, your view is kind of narrow – kind of focused... and Muhammad gave me a broader view of things, of the world," Lonnie said. "He wasn't even in town. I was just walking in our neighborhood, and I just remember that thought went through my head: that one day I was going to marry him." The two married on Nov. 19, 1986, in their hometown of Louisville.

It is precisely because of Lonnie's deep connection with Muhammad that she has dedicated herself to preserving the legacy that he created and to making sure that his impact on the world is celebrated and honored for the rest of time.

"Most of my life is dedicated to that Ali legacy, and it's a feel-good legacy. You know, it's something that you get up and you feel good about because you're doing good in the world and you're helping people and you're reaching out to people and making them feel good too, which Muhammad did every day of his life," she said.

Lonnie Ali, born Yolanda Williams, grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, the city she will always align herself with despite not living there anymore.

"I think really, as far as a close relationship – more of an intimate relationship – with the city started when I married Muhammad because Muhammad was so connected to this city. He loved it regardless of where he lived. He was always a Louisvillian and he loved being home," she said.



Lonnie Ali holds baby Mikey, the son of Bess Goldy, in the Ali Center on Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023, in Louisville, Ky.

She attended Mercy Academy as a high school student before graduating and getting her bachelor's degree in psychology from Vanderbilt University. She initially aspired to become a child psychologist, but, afraid that she wouldn't be accepted into any graduate programs, she applied for a position at Kraft Foods back in Louisville as a backup plan.

After receiving an acceptance letter to attend the University of Illinois on the same day she was offered a position at Kraft Foods, she chose to take the business route and went with the latter choice.

That being said, none of the skills Lonnie developed while studying psychology have gone to waste, even today. "I have applied psychology in business a lot, especially with dealing with people," Lonnie said. "Personalities, situations that come up in business... body language, a lot of things, why people do the things they do."

Having a background in psychology has proven to be useful to Lonnie with her everyday social interactions as well.

"My first instinct is to be trusting and open, and I think psychology sort of gave me that extra layer of being able to see people's true motives, and sort of figure out the dynamics better of who they were as individuals and who I was doing business with," she said.

Lonnie then chose to broaden and refine her business skills by receiving her MBA from the University of California Los Angeles, after which Muhammad decided to put her in charge of all of his business affairs. Muhammad was not someone who cared much for business, but Lonnie was, which he recognized and acknowledged.

"He entrusted me with his business, which was not normal for most people," Lonnie said. "And what was so good about Muhammad is that he knew what he knew and he knew what he didn't know, and he got out of the way."

Recognizing where his strengths were and where he needed assistance from others was one of his best characteristics, Lonnie said, which led him to provide her with the chance to grow in the field that she wanted.

"He gave me the opportunity to sort of blossom and become that business person and entrepreneur. And of course, I felt that I was there to support him in his mission: his humanitarian missions, his life mission, his health, his welfare, everything. I felt that that was where I was supportive of him, and making sure that his life ran smoothly – that he didn't have to worry about those kinds of issues regarding business, finances, personnel, none of that. All he had to do was be Muhammad, which

he did well," Lonnie said.

Lonnie chose to assume responsibility for most of Muhammad's affairs, especially as his battle with Parkinson's disease began to worsen. She was his primary caregiver throughout their time together, which included taking him to all of his physician appointments and taking care of his needs when he was unable to do so for himself. On March 16, 2019, Lonnie was honored with the Keep Memory Alive Caregiver Hero Award, granted to her by Cleveland Clinic Nevada, for the dedication she exuded toward taking care of her husband, an accomplishment Ramsey believes she is incredibly deserving of.

"People who knew that I knew Muhammad well would say, 'How's Champ doing? How is he doing?' I said, 'He lives like he wanted to live, he lives like a king,' and Lonnie made sure that he had that life. When Parkinson's really set in on him, he needed help, and Lonnie always got the best of help," he said.

Being Muhammad's caregiver was a responsibility Lonnie took on proudly as his devoted wife, but the stress of having to take care of both someone else's needs as well as her own was one she was not readily prepared for.

"I will admit, I thought I was doing really good. I thought, 'Okay, I'm gonna do this,' you know, did all my annual physicals

and exams, exercise, try to eat right. But still, the stress of being a caregiver takes a toll on you. I don't think that you even know until afterwards. So I realized that even though I thought I was taking good care of myself, I wasn't probably taking the best care, because part of that care is giving yourself mental breaks – mental and physical breaks – and not everybody can do that," Lonnie said.

Ramsey said that he noticed how Lonnie would very often put Muhammad's needs before her own, sometimes neglecting to take care of herself as a result.

"She didn't take time off, she knew that she was the one who took best care of him, and Muhammad was most comfortable with her too. So it was kind of a two-way street; she wanted to be with him and he needed her," Ramsey said.

Lonnie is a big advocate for Parkinson's disease research and has dedicated much of her philanthropic endeavors toward the cause.

The Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix was founded in 1997 to provide Parkinson's patients with the same high-quality level of care that Muhammad was fortunate enough to receive, Lonnie said.

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— JOHN RAMSEY
WAVE 3 NEWS

"It's the kind of care that I wanted, that Muhammad received that we wanted everyone else to receive, and so we still build on that," she said.

Lonnie's advocacy for Parkinson's disease treatment goes beyond just research. She focuses much of her own time and resources on outreach and connecting with those who have been affected by Parkinson's in some way.

"The research is the research, but I'm more about the outreach and making sure people can live quality lives on a daily basis because that's where the challenge comes in: it's that day-to-day living. How are they experiencing that? How are caregivers experiencing that?" she said.

Another philanthropic cause Lonnie is passionate about is education – "the key to success" – and providing access to education in some format to every child. Her adoration for children is also evident in how much time she likes to spend with her 12 grandchildren.

But above all else, Lonnie is the most dedicated to Muhammad and his legacy, and what she can do to spread his impact farther than just Kentucky. Muhammad Ali died on June 3, 2016, and since then Lonnie has chosen to use her own legacy to uplift that of her late husband, which mostly consists of putting energy toward the Muhammad Ali Center, where she said she spends around 80% of her time as the figurehead for the Center despite dividing her time between Kentucky and Arizona. It is at the Center where Lonnie said she feels connected the most with Louisville, and where she and Muhammad have always felt closest with their beloved hometown.

"I think Muhammad's legacy is for everyone, you know, so social justice especially is one of the key components of our new strategic plan [for the Center]... So that is one of the things that we will be pursuing and advancing here more so than we did in the past," Lonnie said.

Muhammad Ali has no doubt left an impact on the world by his own merit, but it is Lonnie Ali who has cultivated a life dedicated to making sure the world never forgets her husband fueled by the love she has had for him all of her life. Lonnie was not someone who walked in the shadow of her husband, but beside him, and although she prefers to avoid the spotlight when she can, the work she has done behind the scenes to preserve Muhammad's legacy – both during and after his life – has been plentiful and continues to advance.

A podcast starring both Lonnie and Ramsey titled "Ali and Me" is currently in the works aimed to "bridge the divide" in society, as Lonnie put it, through Muhammad's social impact. Guest stars such as LeBron James and Mike Tyson are lined up to appear on the podcast to talk about how to use their platforms to speak up about causes that are important to them, the way Muhammad did.

"I am very honored that she trusts me with the brand and what Muhammad stood for. She knows I know him, and I'm very protective of his legacy as she is, and I think she knows that," Ramsey said.



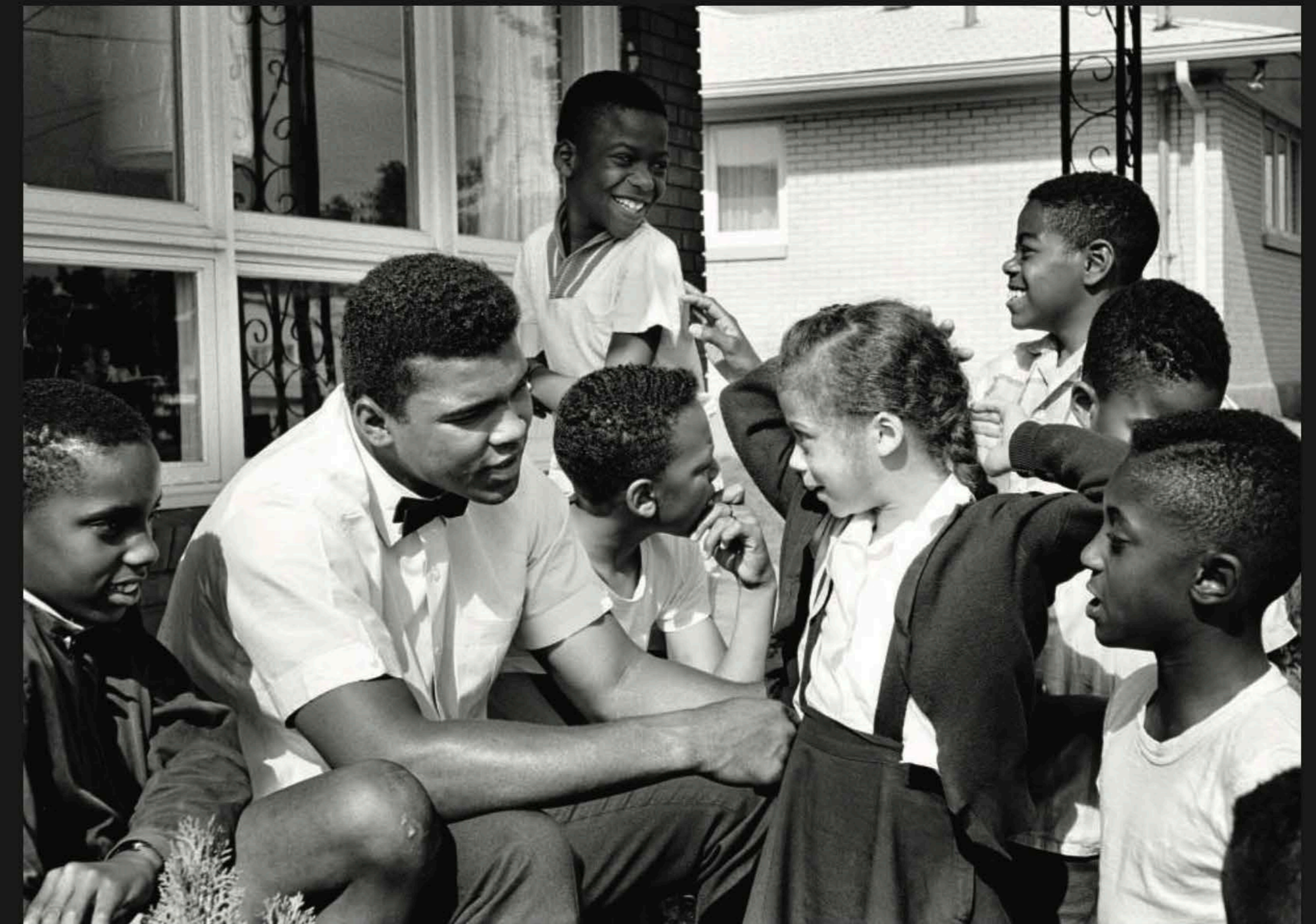
Steve Schapiro:
Muhammad and Lonnie
Ali, 1962.
Gifted to the Muhammad Ali Center by Steve Schapiro's
wife and son, Isaac Schapiro and Therapist Domagala.



Lonnie Ali observes a photo depicting the day that she met her future husband by photographer Steve Schapiro in the Ali Center on Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023, in Louisville, Ky.



PHOTOS BY STEVE SCHAPIRO



A 21-year-old Muhammad Ali interacts with neighborhood children, including 6-year-old Lonnie, in his hometown of Louisville, Ky., in 1963.

A musical about Muhammad's life, written by the Louisville Orchestra's musical director Teddy Abrams, is also in development, which Lonnie hopes will be able to premiere in Louisville before making its way to Broadway.

Lonnie is also involved in the creation of a three-season television series about Muhammad produced by Amazon, and that's not even the end of it either. There will always be a new Muhammad Ali story to tell, a new project to be released, all in the effort of expanding his legacy, and all of it orchestrated by the person who has always cared for him the most: Lonnie Ali.

"A lot of people wouldn't like me saying this, but I really don't think about my legacy because it's so

intertwined with his [Muhammad's]. My legacy is to be that wife, to be that guardian of his legacy, and to ensure that it's there for generations to come," Lonnie said.

"But it's also to be the example of that legacy, and that's a tough nut, I'm telling you, because Muhammad was extraordinary... So however people want to remember me in that regard, that's up to them, and I think that's really what legacies are about: you try to do the best you can do every day, try to spread a little joy or happiness every day. And it's helped people remember you and what that means to them and how that may inspire others after you're gone. So if I can do that, especially for my grandchildren, then I've done my job." •

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Lonnie Ali