

Meeting with the Champ

By Joe Palladino

Muhammad Ali once said that he could "float like a butterfly." Right now, the only man I know who does not touch the ground is Felix Rodriguez.

Rodriguez is the Waterbury man who published a piece of juvenile fiction about growing up fatherless, focusing on a dream meeting he had with Ali, his idol, called "Dad, Me, and Muhammad Ali." Recently, Ali's wife, Lonnie, invited Rodriguez to the Ali Center in Louisville, Ky., for a reading and book signing. While there, Felix had another meeting with The Champ, where he personally presented a copy to Ali.

"My feet haven't touched the ground since," Rodriguez said.

The book grew out of a remarkable meeting between Rodriguez and Ali in December of 2004. Ali befriended Rodriguez and his son, also named Felix but called JoJo, now 15 and a freshman at Wilby High. Rodriguez used the moment as his dramatic lynchpin to address what he views as a major crisis in this country: the 25 million fatherless boys and girls growing up in America, which is more than 40 percent of all children.



Former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali looks through the book written by Waterbury man, Felix Rodriguez, left, titled "Dad, Me, and Muhammad Ali." Rodriguez held a book signing at the Ali Center in Louisville, Ky. during Labor Day weekend, when Ali stopped in to visit. The book is about Rodriguez growing up fatherless in Waterbury, and the inspiration he gained from learning about the life of The Champ. (contributed photo)

"Dad, Me, and Muhammad Ali," written in JoJo's voice, addresses the importance of family and reaffirms Ali's core values that form the basis of his center: respect, confidence, conviction, dedication, giving and spirituality.

Rodriguez traveled to Louisville for the Labor Day weekend celebration of the 50th anniversary of Ali, then called Cassius Clay, winning the Olympic boxing gold medal at the 1960 Games of Rome, Italy. His publisher gave him a case of 50 books, and off went the Rodriguez family, expecting nothing more than a great day as part of the Center's activities.

"I sat there signing copies with JoJo," said dad. "People said, 'He's on the book cover, we want his autograph too.'"

Felix soon noticed that people had dropped out of line, and he heard someone whisper, "The Champ is here."

"I didn't want to seem like a groupie," Rodriguez said, "but I wanted to run and see too. I just kept signing and tried to be cool."

That's when Lonnie Ali stepped over and, meeting Felix for the first time, gave him a hug "as if we were family."

Lonnie brings Rodriguez and JoJo to sit with Ali. "I tell Muhammad about the book, our meeting in 2004, and what an inspiration he was in my life. He couldn't speak, but he understood everything. He opened his eyes real wide, and he slowly reached out to shake hands with me and JoJo."

Many people have heroes who inspire them to survive a primary education on the streets. Many, like Rodriguez, might meet their hero. But Felix used that experience to write a book that could change lives, one youngster at a time.

"I sat down with the Greatest Of All Time, and presented him the book that I wrote about him," said Rodriguez. "The only thing that could top that is if President Obama, who is also a fatherless child, or Oprah read it."

Rodriguez left Louisville beaming about one other fact: In the Center's gift shop, he saw four books for sale, "The Soul Of A Butterfly" by Muhammad and Hana Yasmeen Ali; "USA Today Special Edition: Muhammad Ali"; "I Shook Up the World" by Maryum "May May" Ali; and "Dad, Me, and Muhammad Ali," written by a survivor of Waterbury's mean streets, thanks to lessons learned from his idol.

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