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LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- Just as Elvis Presley's Graceland is the symbol of a Southern dream, the Muhammad Ali Center will become a "greatland" for global ideals. The Ali Center opened weeks ago in downtown Louisville with the creed "The Greatest Is Yet to Come."

The Champ now stands with the King as one of the biggest American tourist destinations devoted to one person. And while Elvis had a hit with "Kentucky Rain," Ali reigns in Kentucky and beyond.

The Ali Center -- only a portion of which features boxing memorabilia -- even has a bejeweled jumpsuit titled "The People's Choice" that was a gift to Ali from the King. Ali first wore it into the ring, appropriately enough, in Las Vegas on Feb. 14, 1973, where he whopped Joe Bugner in 12 rounds.

The new six-story facility in Ali's hometown consists of 40 interactive exhibits, incorporating 19 different languages. Many exhibits are geared toward children.

And they're about something more than Ali himself.

"When we embarked on this project we made it clear we did not want the Ali Center to be a place that idolized Muhammad," said Lonnie Ali, the 49-year-old wife of Muhammad Ali. The center opened on Nov. 19, the couple's 19th wedding anniversary. "Rather, it is about the spirituality of the human being and how it centers a person, the way it centered Muhammad."

A heartwarming anchor of the Ali Center is a colorful 55-foot-long installation composed of more than 5,000 tile drawings by children from 141 countries. The "Hope and Dream" project is designed by New York-based Korean artist Ik-Joong Kang and is underwritten by actress Angelina Jolie.

Children were asked to depict their hopes for the future and wishes for the world. Zaki from Afghanistan wrote, "I am 8 years old, an Afghan girl dreaming of education and employment." A child from Israel wrote "Peace," along with two men shaking hands.

The \$80 million Ali Center honors peace, respect and social responsibility. In fact, the Nov. 19 opening night gala was delayed by 40 minutes because President Bill Clinton was meeting with the Ali family. Their conversation reportedly included the vision of using the Ali Center as a location for conflict resolution in the spirit of the United Nations.

Beyond his boxing career, Ali shared his other talents. In December 1990, Ali helped secure the release of 14 American hostages held in Iraq during the prelude to the Gulf War. Ali journeyed to South Africa upon Nelson Mandela's release from prison. He has delivered medical supplies to an embargoed Cuba. In 2000, Secretary-General Kofi Annan named Ali a United Nations Messenger of Peace.

The center takes an honest look at Ali, even confronting a personal life that has encompassed four marriages, nine children and six grandchildren. "He is human," Lonnie Ali said. "There were times when Muhammad let his temper get the best of him. That's the human side. That wasn't his

spiritual side coming out. When you're looking at the life of a person, you have to look at everything."

The champ attended all of the opening weekend ceremonies. It was his first visit to Louisville since April, when the center's girders were going up. During the course of the opening festivities, the 63-year-old Ali trembled, a sign of his ongoing battle with Parkinson's disease. He had trouble walking and he did not speak.

He did offer a written statement that said, in part, "I am an ordinary man who worked hard to develop the talent I was given. I believed in myself and the goodness of others. ... I wanted a place that would inspire people to be the best that they could be at whatever they chose to do, and to encourage them to be respectful of one another."

Lonnie Ali said her husband has been "doing great. ... Actually, he was in the hospital two months ago," she said. "He had neck surgery. He has Spinal Stenosis. Now he's in physical therapy. When he went to the White House in early November to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, it was made out like he was dying. He's not. Muhammad is one who never gives up. The therapy has been a real gift for his neck, but also for his Parkinson's. His excitement for this center is almost too hard for him to express in words. For others to make our dream a reality for him is something that is beyond words."

The museum path begins on the fifth floor of the center as visitors walk through Ali's life in chronological order. The importance of a red replica Schwinn bicycle near the entrance cannot be overstated.

At age 12, Cassius Marcellus Clay had a similar bicycle stolen from the front of the Columbia Auditorium near downtown Louisville. Clay was upset and threatened to "whup" the thief. When Clay reported the theft, he met police officer Joe Martin, who was white. Martin ran a boxing program for the Louisville Parks Department and gave Clay his first lessons.

This exhibit shows the impact of one man, regardless of race.

"Muhammad always felt in his heart he was going to be something big," Lonnie Ali said. "It was just the kind of personality he had. He always had a great belief in himself and what he stood for. Fortunately, he discovered boxing at 12."

It takes time to digest the text that covers Louisville's position in the civil rights movement and Ali's refusal to serve in the Vietnam War. The ability to find strength in conviction is a theme here. The exhibit area is anchored by a replica Louisville soda fountain diner circa 1960 with a sign that says "You Can't Come In."

A key quotation comes from 1967's *Black Is Best* (The Riddle of Cassius Clay), in which Ali said, "I used to walk down the main street of Louisville, Kentucky, looking at how Negroes couldn't go to the show, looking how Negroes couldn't eat here, or how the whites look at them after Negroes have been working 310 years for America, working 16 hours a day without a payday, fighting the wars for America."

And it was on a main street in Louisville, Ky., during the opening night ceremonies that Ali turned around and gave a jaunty wave to the crowd of more than 200 predominately white people who were chanting "Ali! Ali! Ali!"

Workers spent 20-hour days readying the center for opening weekend. The gift shop wasn't yet

open. Ali's favorite 1977 Rolls Royce Corniche was still sitting under a white cloth in a garage. Office space won't be completed until the spring. An outdoor reflective pool and amphitheater seating will be in place by summer.

When I embarked on a two-hour tour of the center, the LeRoy Neiman gallery had yet to be installed. By the time I was done, Neiman's paintings were up. Neiman is one of Ali's closest friends. On a dare from Ali in 1970, Neiman drew Ali in the dark before the champ's TKO over Oscar Bonavena in Madison Square Garden. The resulting drawing is on display in the center.

Visitors look down from the circular fifth floor pavilion onto a 20-foot boxing ring that was used in the 2001 movie "Ali." The ring is the backdrop for an autobiographical 13-minute film "The Greatest," custom-made for the Ali Center and narrated by actor Samuel L. Jackson.

Near the ring, visitors can sit in comfortable chairs and watch film highlights of 15 Ali fights, dating back to the first Clay-Liston bout in 1964. I took in Ali's 1967 match against Chicagoan Ernie Terrell at the Houston Astrodome. He consistently taunted Terrell because the boxer called him by his slave name, Cassius Clay. Ali prevailed in 12 rounds.

Also near the ring is a detailed life-size replica of Ali's rustic Deer Lake, Pa., training camp. Inside the camp's cabin, visitors can take aim at a red Everlast punching bag and shadowbox against a boxer's shadow reportedly provided by Ali's youngest daughter Laila, also a prize fighter. The fourth floor also features the torch Ali used to light the cauldron at the 1996 Olympic Summer Games in Atlanta.

A fifth floor "Spirituality Pavilion" is reserved for low-key discussion on hotel lobby-type sofas. Through non-sectarian and non-evangelical examples of centering, visitors can listen to music and words about spiritual awareness. The area also details Ali's conversion to Islam.

Lonnie Ali said her husband's spirituality is greater now than it was 20 years ago. "As he's grown older, it has only expanded because of his travels," she explained. "With this man, I have witnessed the ability to go anywhere on this earth and be at home. Tolerance has been woven through Muhammad's entire life. Even when Muhammad was a member of the Nation of Islam, he had white Angelo Dundee as a trainer." (The Nation of Islam reportedly requested that Ali replace Dundee with an African-American trainer. Ali refused.) "He had admiration and respect for people of a lot of colors and persuasions. Even though he sometimes got caught up in the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam, it wasn't what defined him as a human being."

Surprisingly, the opening weekend turnout included more Hollywood celebrities than representatives of the sports world. Ali is generally regarded as the greatest athlete of the 20th century. Where was Michael Jordan, Jim Brown, Oscar Robertson or dozens of fighters? Evander Holyfield and Lennox Lewis were the only two boxers there.

During the opening night concert, sportscaster Bob Costas said, "You sometimes hear today that in referencing every loudmouth exhibitionist lout that they are all descendants of Muhammad Ali. Pleazzzzz! These people have nothing to say. It's all about them. It's all about next year's contract. Led by Muhammad Ali, the athletes of his generation -- the Bill Russells, the Billie Jean Kings, the Arthur Ashes -- their performance and abilities is what focused our attention. That's who they were. It was always about something larger than themselves, especially Muhammad Ali."

Costas is on the center's 26-member advisory council with Angelina Jolie, Bono, Billy Crystal, Sean "Diddy" Combs, former NBA great David Robinson and actor-comedian Robin Williams.

There's no excuse to miss the Ali Center if you live around Chicago. Louisville is an easy drive from Chicago, just a five-hour shot down Interstate 65 through Indiana. I've driven this road a million times on my way to Nashville, Tenn. When I cross the Jefferson Bridge over the Ohio River and enter downtown Louisville, I believe I've arrived in the South. Lonnie Ali chuckled at the thought.

"In the South?" she asked. "You're in the South when you get to southern Indiana! Louisville is a beautiful city, and the mayor Jerry Abramson has taken great pains in developing the downtown area. It's just beautiful when you see the waterfront when going over the bridge."

Last month the waterfront got a lot more beautiful. The champ has come home to where the grass is blue and dreams can come true.

REALLY FINE, AND AHEAD OF HIS TIME:

Muhammad Ali was rapping and rhyming long before it became a commercial art form.

A wall in the fifth floor Dedication Pavilion at the Muhammad Ali Center features the poem "How Cassius Took Rome," composed by Cassius Clay in 1960:

To make America the greatest is my goal

So I beat the Russian and I beat the Pole,

And for the U.S.A. won the medal of Gold

The Italians said, 'You're greater than the Cassius of old

'We like your name, we like your game, so make Rome your home if you will.'

I said, 'I appreciate your kind hospitality, but the U.S.A. is my country still

Because they're waiting to welcome me in Louisville.'

My vinyl collection includes Clay's 1964 "I AM THE GREATEST!" LP with his raps layered over music by Peter Matz (who won an Emmy for his music on "The Carol Burnett Show"). The 1999 CD reissue includes a bonus track of Ali singing the Matz tune "The Gang's All Here," which was produced by Sam Cooke. The late Chicago singer attended the February 1964 Ali-Liston fight in Miami Beach, Fla., and proclaimed Ali "the world's greatest rock 'n' roll singer."

In 1976, Ali laid out his chops on the album "Ali and His Gang vs. Mr. Tooth Decay (A Children's Story)," which featured guest stars Ossie Davis, Frank Sinatra and folk singer Richie Havens, who performed at the opening gala of the Ali Center. Ali's raps: "I hospitalized a brick / I'm so mean I make medicine sick ..." and in "Ice Cream," Sinatra sings about trying to sell the sweet stuff to unsuspecting kids.

The museum's fourth floor features an area where children are encouraged to compose poems about hopes and dreams. A 2003 quote from poet-publisher Michael Wiegers is posted. It reads: "Each poem marks a beginning."

