

### MY TWIN BROTHER, PETROS, AND I FIRST MET

Cassius Clay at a tournament in Madison, Wis., in 1959. Here's this young black kid, all of 17, making all these outrageous remarks. He told everyone he was going to make the team for the Pan American Games, then he was going to win a gold medal at the Olympics, then he was going to become the champion of the world. I thought he was delusional. Well, he didn't make the Pan Am Games, but he did win the Olympic gold and he did become champ, so two out three ain't bad.

We spent a lot of time with Cassius – back then he was known as Cassius Clay – and got to know him quite well. We lived together when we were training for the U.S. boxing team, and later we were roommates at the Rome Olympics. He would always make these sly remarks. When he called my brother he would say, "Has Nikos grown any?" Because I was a short guy. Sometimes he would call me "Mr. Greek." We trained together and ate together, but because of segregation, we could never socialize. There was this invisible curtain between the white athletes and the black ones. It's something I regret to this day.

Cassius was so desperately poor. I remember that. He would offer to wash our underwear or our socks for 15 cents. He would give you a rubdown or what he called a "brain massage" for two bits. He was always begging for money, because he didn't have much growing up.

He was not real popular among his teammates. Everything that came out of his mouth was about himself. And it's hard to like someone like that. But I came to see that he was a decent human who was up against a lot. He came out of poverty. He was ostracized and belittled during his youth, so maybe all the boasting was his way of fighting back.

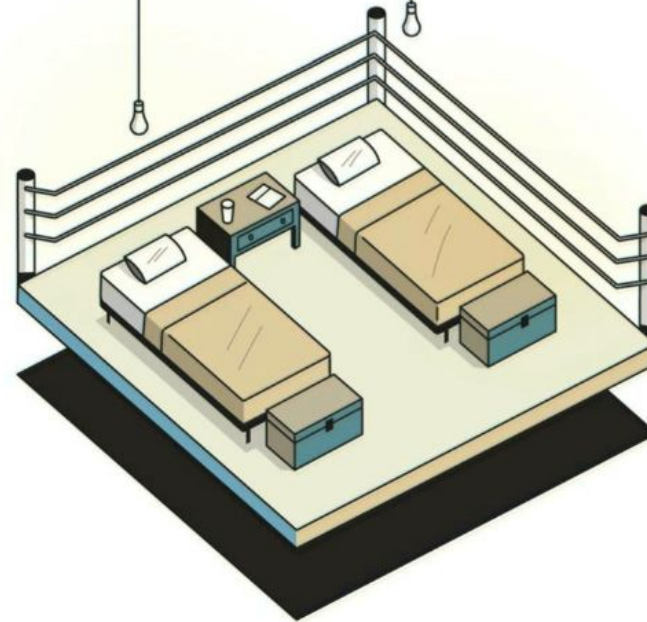
Of course, his saving grace was that he was a phenomenal athlete. He could do everything wrong in the book because he



room with

## Muhammad Ali

NIKOS MICHALIS SPANAKOS  
*Rotary Club of Hallandale Beach-Aventura, Fla.*



had such remarkable reflexes. He could drop his hands by his hips and get away with it. He had courage, too. I saw it in his eyes. He went up against some of the best pros and never took a step back. He would go punch for punch.

I'll tell you a story I never told anybody else. When we were fighting in the Golden Gloves tournament in Chicago, they set up these cots so we could rest between fights, and I remember Cassius was on his knees next to the cot, praying. He was a Christian back then. He used to listen to these Southern Baptist radio programs and he would go berserk, screaming and shouting and running around. Whatever Cassius did, he wanted to make sure everyone knew about it. Later, down in Miami, he converted to being a Muslim. He was a deep believer when it came to religion.

A few years after the Olympics, I invited him to visit my students when I was reaching business in Brooklyn, N.Y., and he was telling them, you know, "You people don't have any language." He said a few words in Swahili, just to make the point, and an elderly black man in the crowd said something back to him in Swahili. He had no idea what the man had said, so he asked me who the guy was. "That's our Swahili teacher," I told him. He flashed that smile of his. "Nick, you're trying to make me look bad in front of my people!" He knew he had been found out, but he made a joke out of it. That was pure Ali.

He had such gifts. But he didn't know when to quit. All the punches caught up with him. He got Parkinson's disease in 1984 and lived with it for 32 years before he died. His brain became a prison cell. That's where I really felt profound sorrow for him.

What I admire most about Ali is his self-belief. He was this brash young kid who had an outrageous dream, and he made that dream come true. At 17, he knew he was going to be a world champion. Think about that. That's amazing.

– As told to Steve Almond

# work with a therapy dog

VANITA LOUIE

Rotary Club of San Francisco Chinatown

**MOO MOO IS A BRUSSELS GRIFFON.** That's the kind of dog that Jack Nicholson has in the movie *As Good as It Gets*. She's 9½ years old, and I've had her since she was three. I believe all dogs are special, but I've always known Moo Moo had a gift: She can sense when somebody is in distress. I saw that quality in her the first time we met. She was so alert and observant.

Six years ago, I trained her as a service dog. She had to pass a series of four tests. Some dogs are trained to provide a physical service, like being a seeing-eye dog,

Moo Moo is a therapy dog. It's her instinct to comfort people, especially if they have a special need or ailment.

She has a schedule. She visits the Kaiser Permanente hospital and the UCSF Medical Center every month, and she visits autistic children at public schools twice a month. She sees people who are very ill with cancer and other ailments. She'll walk right up to a person who is lying in bed with their eyes closed and she'll nudge them with her paws.

When we visit schools, we read to kids

who often have trouble controlling their bodies. They have so much energy. And Moo Moo is able to deal with that. She lets them pet her. She's very relaxed, and it rubs off on them. She knows, *This is what I need to do to help these kids calm down*. In those moments she becomes everyone's dog.

I always wonder why Moo Moo doesn't play with balls or run around. If I took her to the park and removed her leash, she wouldn't run around with the other dogs. It's like she doesn't know she's a dog. Even the teachers notice that – how much she acts like a human.

When I bring her to Rotary meetings, she sits quietly. When she hears the bell ring, she sits up because she knows the meeting has started. She's quiet and attentive. And she knows the meeting is over when the bell rings again.

She provides a lot of happiness at our meetings. I'm the president of the Rotary Club of San Francisco Chinatown, and the members are always asking me, "When is Moo Moo coming back?" If I don't bring her, they ask why she's not there. She also loves to get dressed up in her Rotary scarf for fundraisers and other functions. She loves partying. But when it comes to service visits, she puts on her therapy vest and that's work time.

You know how Rotarians are always trying to give back? I believe that's how Moo Moo sees it – that it's her job to bring moments of joy to people who are suffering.

– As told to Steve Almond



**RICK WILSON**

*Rotary Club of Sebastopol, Calif.*

**I OWNED A WHITEWATER RAFTING BUSINESS**

in Rumsey, Calif., for 23 years. One day shortly after I bought it, there was a knock on the door. It was the sheriff saying there's an emergency on the river and asking if I would loan him a boat. I said, "I'll do better than that. I'll come with you." It didn't take long to figure out I should be a member of the volunteer fire department. I coordinated rescues on the river for 15 years.

Living there, you never could totally relax. You didn't know what hour of the day or night you would get called or what the problem was going to be. There were some weekends we didn't have a call at all; some weekends we had five. Most often it was a rescue for somebody who was on the river on their own and didn't have the right equipment.

I remember one young man who had gotten thrown out of his boat, and his foot had gotten lodged between two rocks. When we first got there, he was standing, but we could tell that it wasn't going to be long before he was going to topple over. You can't really hear because of the roar of the river, so you just have to read how they're doing by looking at their body language. If you study somebody closely enough, they're going to give you clues.

For example, when you approach somebody in distress, you don't grab them with your hand, because a lot of times they get into a panic mode. Then they look at you like you're a ladder, and all they want to do is climb you. You go out with a life jacket, something you can hand them, and that way you have a chance to gauge the look in their eyes. You can figure out: Is this person going to be helpful, or is this



person so panicked that they're going to do something stupid?

Anyway, while we were waiting for equipment, it became clear that the current was wearing him down and he wasn't going to be able to keep his head above water. Rather than waiting for the equipment, I decided that I and another guy were going to go get this kid or he wasn't going to make it. My job was to reach out and grab him and get him in the boat while the other guy was paddling. Luckily, we got him to safety. He was very grateful, and that was the end of it. Everybody took a deep breath and went back to work.

When something like that happens, your adrenaline is up, and anyone who says it isn't is a liar. When somebody's life is in jeopardy, that's where the importance of training comes in. You get into this mode where you're almost on automatic pilot and you're just reacting. You're doing the things you've been trained to do over the years; there's no time to rationally think about it.

My experience with rescues made me believe that every child deserves to know how to swim. For 32 years, our Rotary club has taught every second-grade child in Sebastopol how to swim for free. We've taught more than 10,000 children over the years. When you join my club you get a mentor, and when my mentor looked at my CV and saw I had had a whitewater rafting business, he said, "I believe you'll be helping with swimming," and I said, "Yes, I will." For every 100 children you teach to swim, you save a life. Ten thousand kids in 32 years – that's a lot of lives.  
– As told to Anne Ford

**save someone from drowning**