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By Karen Crouse

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Muhammad Ali Was Her First, and Greatest, Love



Cassius Clay (later Muhammad Ali) and Lonnie Williams (later Ali) in Louisville in 1963, when he was 21 and she was 6. Credit Steve Schapiro/Corbis, via Getty Images

The pretty woman walked into the Ringside Cafe in Louisville, Ky., and approached the three-time heavyweight boxing champion, who led her to a quiet corner. The restaurant's owner, John Ramsey, surreptitiously watched as [Muhammad Ali](#) flirted shamelessly with the pretty woman, who six years earlier had become his fourth wife. On that day in 1992, Ramsey learned all he needed to know about Lonnie Ali by observing the effect she had on his longtime friend.

“He was trying to kiss her on the cheek, and she was blushing and trying to pull away, and he was pulling her close and whispering in her ear,” Ramsey said. “It warmed my heart. I had never seen him in that capacity. I saw a side of Muhammad Ali that wasn't the fighter, that wasn't the humanitarian, that was the guy in love with the girl.”

[Ali's death last Friday at age 74](#), after a long battle with Parkinson's disease, has stirred a weeklong retrospective on a life spent fighting for championship belts and charitable and civil causes.

During his public funeral in Louisville on Friday, the spotlight will shift, however briefly, to Lonnie, 59, one of several speakers who will deliver eulogies. Few people can offer a better, or broader, perspective of the sweep of Ali's life than the former Yolanda Williams, known as Lonnie, who [met him as a pigtailed first grader in Louisville](#), their hometown, and grew up to become Ali's caregiver and keeper of his legacy.

In their 30 years of marriage, friends said in interviews, Lonnie was a doting wife but also a hard-nosed M.B.A. who managed Ali's affairs with steely determination. She protected Ali's health and wealth, both of which were in sharp decline when they married. Friends said that, by all indications, the couple enjoyed a deep bond. They managed to avoid the harsh tabloid parsing of their marriage common among celebrities.

Lonnie was a hometown girl, but worldly enough to know that Ali's fame called for foreign dignitaries like President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and King Abdullah II of Jordan to take part in the funeral.

Here Are the People Who Will Eulogize Muhammad Ali

Bill Clinton, Billy Crystal, Bryant Gumbel and Lonnie Ali will speak during the funeral today.

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/10/sports/muhammad-ali-funeral-eulogy-bill-clinton.html>



“She took care of his every need,” Ramsey said. “I used to tell Muhammad, ‘If reincarnation is true, I want to come back as you,’ because Lonnie spoiled him rotten. And her affections never wavered. She stuck by him through everything.”

Those who were close to them said that in Lonnie, Ali found a partner who matched his wit and far exceeded his ability to recognize freeloaders and ne'er-do-wells.

Jimmy Walker, a philanthropist based in Phoenix who also runs an [estate planning](#) and executive benefits business, described her as “the perfect wife for the most recognized man in the world.”

“Due to Muhammad's health situation, in order to protect him, I am sure she has had to say no many times, which hasn't always been popular among some people that didn't quite understand,” Walker said.

She “protected Muhammad from people who didn’t have his best interests at heart,” he added, and repeated a line uttered by the photographer Howard Bingham, a longtime Ali confidant: “Lonnie took names and kicked butt.”

Last Friday evening, less than two hours after Ali died of septic shock in a hospital in the Phoenix area, Walker and his wife visited Lonnie at the home she shared with Ali in a gated community in a Phoenix suburb. Walker said they found her sitting in the brown-leather power reclining chair where in recent years Ali whiled away his days watching CNN, VH1 and tapes of his championship fights.



Lonnie at a traditional Muslim funeral service for Ali on Thursday at Freedom Hall in Louisville, Ky. She will deliver a eulogy at his public funeral on Friday. Credit Darron Cummings/Associated Press

Lonnie, he said, was staring at the television, tuned to CNN’s coverage of her husband’s death. Her sister Marilyn, who helped care for Ali, and Asaad, her adopted son with Ali who played baseball at Louisville and is the assistant baseball coach at Ellsworth Community College in Iowa Falls, were also there.

Though she had helped Ali prepare detailed instructions for his funeral several years ago, Lonnie was still staggered by his death. Walker said Lonnie greeted him at the house by saying softly, “I can’t believe it.”

Their First Sight

Ali was bursting with life the first time Lonnie met him. It was 1963 and her family had recently moved to the Montclair Villa subdivision in Louisville. Their house on Verona Way was across from the place that Ali bought for his parents, Odessa and Cassius Marcellus Clay, after he won a boxing gold medal at the 1960 Summer Olympics and turned professional.

Lonnie's mother, Marguerite Williams, became friends with Ali's mother, accompanying her over the years to many of Ali's championship fights. Anytime Ali came to visit Odessa, he would always stay to play with the neighborhood children. During one such visit, Ali, then 21, was introduced to the 6-year-old Lonnie. In [a 2012 interview](#) with The New York Times Magazine, she recalled that she was "scared to death" and hid behind her mother's dress.

Lonnie quickly warmed to Ali, their friends said. Rhonda K. Richardson, a lawyer who grew up near Lonnie and has been friends with her for more than 50 years, said the Williamses' house was the neighborhood's social center. "Her mother was very nurturing," said Richardson, who salivates at the memory of Marguerite's cherry delight, a dessert that was similar to cheesecake, only more tart.

"I lived more there than at my house," she said. "That's the kind of household it was."

Richardson remembered going to the Williamses' dinner table and seeing Ali already seated. "He was just a part of her family," she said.



Lonnie and Ali at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012. Credit Cameron Spencer/Getty Images

Over the years, she recalled each of Ali's wives joining him at the table. He married Sonji Roi in 1964; Belinda Boyd, with whom he had four children, in 1967; and Veronica Porche, with whom he had two children, in 1977. He also had two children by different women outside his marriages.

As Lonnie navigated adolescence, Ali was like another big brother to her, dispensing advice that included never getting romantically involved with athletes because they wouldn't treat her well.

"We were all enchanted with Muhammad," Richardson said, "but as we got older, that enchantment turned into something deeper for Lonnie. I think Muhammad is probably the only man that Lonnie has ever loved."

At 17, Lonnie had an epiphany. “I knew I was going to marry Muhammad,” she said in the 2012 New York Times Magazine article. “I was just a kid in school, and I had things I needed to do, but I knew. I was young, but it was intuitive. The thought was like an umbrella, always over my head.”

Lonnie earned an undergraduate degree in psychology at Vanderbilt in 1978. She served briefly as an employment counselor for the State of Kentucky before taking a job in account sales with Kraft Foods. In 1982, she was invited to lunch by Ali during one of his visits to Louisville.

Two years had passed since his 10th-round defeat to Larry Holmes in a bout that the actor Sylvester Stallone later described as “like watching an autopsy on a man who’s still alive.”

The meal left a bad taste with Lonnie, who was alarmed by Ali’s condition. He appeared to be depressed and was in poor physical condition. In his 2009 book, “Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon,” Michael Ezra wrote that Lonnie agreed to move to Los Angeles to become Ali’s primary caregiver in return for Ali paying for her to attend graduate school at U.C.L.A., an arrangement that he said had the approval of Ali’s wife at the time, Porche.

Her intervention revived Ali and his fortunes, said Dave Kindred, who covered Ali for The Louisville Courier-Journal, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and The Washington Post and wrote a book, “Sound and Fury,” about the unlikely friendship between Ali and the sportscaster Howard Cosell. “I think Ali would have been gone and forgotten 30 years ago, if not for Lonnie,” he said.

Ali had holed himself up in his Los Angeles mansion and was a recluse in dire need of medical and financial attention, Kindred explained. “She took care of him and created a financial empire for him that made it possible for him to have a comfortable life,” he said.

‘The Right One’

In November 1986, Lonnie accompanied Ali to Louisville. She had completed her master’s in business administration, with an emphasis in marketing, at U.C.L.A, and Ali had obtained his divorce from Porche. Lonnie, raised a Catholic, had also converted to Islam. At a get-together with Richardson, Lonnie casually dropped a bombshell. As Richardson recalled, “She said, ‘I think Muhammad and I are going to get married when we get back to L.A.’”

The shock wasn’t that they were getting married. “Everyone could see they were two peas in a pod,” Richardson said. And, she said, there was the conversation with Ali in which he acknowledged Lonnie “being the right one.” But holding the ceremony in Los Angeles?

“I told her: ‘No way! Absolutely not! You’re going to get married here,’” said Richardson, who helped Lonnie organize a civil ceremony.



Lonnie and Ali accepted the President's Award at the N.A.A.C.P.'s 2009 Image Awards in Los Angeles. Credit Vince Buccini/Getty Images for NAACP

On Nov. 19, 1986, in front of a small gathering, Lonnie, 29, and Ali, 44, were married in the private home of a former mayor of Louisville, Harvey Sloane, then the Jefferson County judge-executive, who officiated.

“Muhammad was diagnosed with Parkinson's right around the time they were married,” Richardson said, “and the No. 1 priority in Lonnie's life over the years has been taking care of him.”

In 1992, Lonnie incorporated Greatest of All Time, Inc. (G.O.A.T. Inc) to consolidate and license Ali's intellectual properties for commercial purposes and served as the vice president and treasurer until the sale of the company in 2006. In 2005, she and her husband founded the multicultural Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville.

It was Lonnie who leaned on Ali to become the face of Parkinson's. The idea came from Dr. Abraham Lieberman, who said he started treating Ali for the disease in the 1980s. He traveled to the couple's summer home in Michigan and delivered his pitch. Lieberman said Ali's initial response was, “I don't want to be the poster boy for Parkinson's.” He added, “Muhammad was afraid he was getting old because he saw Parkinson's as an old-person's disease.”

A Love Story Ends

Upon his return to Phoenix, Lieberman received a call from Ali, who had reconsidered. He told Lieberman to write him a pitch, and Lieberman crafted it as a poem, which he said won Ali over. But before the poem, there was Lonnie's gentle persuasion.

“If she wasn't there he probably would have said no, and that would have been the end of it,” Lieberman said.

Lieberman said that in recent years he visited Ali at his home every other week to check on him. “There were always people in the house,” Lieberman said, painting a picture that calls to mind the warm and welcoming environment that Lonnie’s mother had nurtured on Verona Way.

Ramsey, who will serve as a pallbearer at Friday’s funeral, spent time in the hospital with Asaad, Marilyn, Lonnie and her stepchildren last week as Ali’s condition worsened. Four days after Ali’s death, Ramsey, 55, said, “Lonnie balanced Ali because he loved the spotlight and she never looked for it.” He added: “She used to say, ‘He belongs to the world.’ She embraced that.”

It has been hard to let go. Ramsey said Lonnie told him this week, “John, when I get sad and think I’m going to cry, I hear Muhammad’s voice saying: ‘Stand up. Hold your head up high. Don’t cry.’ And it helps me.”

Ramsey added: “It’s the end of a great love story. Who does recover from that? But she does have that Muhammad DNA. She gets off the mat. She’s strong to the core.”

Correction: June 9, 2016

An earlier version of this article misstated Muhammad Ali’s age at the time of his marriage to the former Lonnie Williams. He was 44, not 54.

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