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Muhammad Ali

Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. was born on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky. At the young age of twelve he discovered his talent for boxing at a local gym trained by police officer, Joe Martin. There he learned how to spar and soon began his boxing career in 1954 in his first amateur bout: which he won. Six years later Clay won a spot on the U.S. Olympic team in which he won the gold medal at the Rome, Italy Olympics. At 18, upon his return to America, Clay was refused service at a restaurant in his hometown that which didn't serve people of color. He was so infuriated to the fact that he could go win a gold medal at the Olympics for a country that treats him as a second-class citizen, so he threw the medal into the Ohio River. ("Cassius Clay Olympic Gold Medal") After this in 1964 he joined the Muslim group Nation of Islam. There he started calling himself Cassius X but then eventually settled on the name Muhammad Ali. Ali was an extremely well-known man made famous at first by his very impressive boxing career that in the ended with an impressive 56-win record. He is "universally regarded as one of the greatest athletes of the 20th century" ("Muhammad Ali"). Although boxing what started Ali's infamous legacy, philanthropy is what made him a legend.

The first time Ali was really regarded as a leader was on March 9, 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, when his draft status was revised to make him eligible to fight in the war. This led him to voice his opinion on the war saying, "My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America" (Calamur) "And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn't put no dogs on me, they didn't rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father. ... Shoot them for what? How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail." In this moment Ali was solidified as an authentic leader. Although he wasn't trying to purposely fight for the right of African American's, that's exactly what he did with that statement. Being that he was the world boxing champion, he had a huge platform so any time he made what looked like a civil right move, it was big news.

The Vietnam War was extremely popular in the United States and the fact that Ali refused to serve was like a blow to the whole nation. This made him a sort of outcast and some could say one of the most hated men of that time. He faced five years in prison, was stripped of his boxing license and title by the New York State Athletic Board and lost much of the support he once had by the public. Even after all this Ali didn't go back on his word and kept on fighting. Ali really embraced the platform he had now and tried to use it to create a change by going on an anti-war college campus tour. He spoke to students at the University of Iowa, University of Pennsylvania, Howard University, University of Rochester, and many more places. His main message was clear; he urged for the equality of citizens of color. Through these campus tours Ali spoke to hundreds of thousands of people around the country about his own beliefs and they wanted to join his cause because of how genuine it was. This shows how Ali is an authentic leader because he practiced what he preached which made his followers more attracted to him. He didn't just talk about being anti-war, he showed it by fighting in a supreme court case about becoming a conscientious objector to allow him not to enlist in the army.

In 1984, three years after his retirement from boxing Muhammad Ali was diagnosed with the neurological disorder, Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's disease is caused by the degeneration

of nerve cells in the brain and affects movement and coordination throughout the body. To many that would be a setback, but he used his platform to become an advocate for raising awareness to the disease, lending his name and money to Parkinson's research. During the 1990's Ali began fighting for the government to increase its funding for Parkinson's research and even donated much of his own earnings towards the research. He even began an annual Celebrity Fight Night to raise funds and it's been estimated that his efforts contributed to 100 million in donations towards Parkinson's. (McCallum) This only increased his credibility more and exhibited why he's regarded as such an authentic leader.

His leadership was extremely evident at the 1996 summer Olympics opening ceremony in Atlanta. As he lit the torch his tremors were very noticeable, and he brought worldwide attention to the disease. Without even saying any words on the topic, Ali used his immense platform to advocate, acknowledge and accept those with Parkinson's. This one act alone greatly increased his following and fanbase as "The People's Champion" and an authentic leader because once again he proved to be someone that is relatable and true. The fact that there was available medication at that time that Ali could have taken to stop the tremors shows how calculated that stance that he took was, showing him as more of a leader. In 1997, the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center was established at the Barrow Neurological Institute, a clinic, outreach, and research center in Phoenix, Arizona. In the ten years following more than twenty-three thousand research articles that have to do with Parkinson's were published in scientific journals. (McCallum)

Ali's leadership in this area has been extremely effective because the results are everywhere. When talking about Ali, "Dr. Michael Okun, the medical director of the National Parkinson Foundation said, "His involvement with Parkinson's disease was really transformational for the field. Before Ali, there wasn't that much known about Parkinson's disease [among the public]. People mistook it for Alzheimer's or ALS, and didn't realize that you could potentially live a long happy life with Parkinson's disease with the right cocktail of medicines, therapies and good expert care." (McCallum) That's a huge achievement and it has helped everyone that has the disease. Another way Ali's leadership was effective aside from increasing awareness and funding was by bettering the current treatment regimen for Parkinson's. It is now accepted in many places that regular exercise can reduce symptoms and greatly improve a patient's quality of life. Because of this, many centers that treat Parkinson's now integrate physical and mental exercise into the treatment of patients.

Another example of Ali's authentic leadership is his very well-known religious tolerance, love of all people, and how he preaches it endlessly. Although he was a very dedicated Muslim, he frequently met with leaders of other religions, like Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama, to create a better understanding between each other globally. In 1998, the United Nations named Ali a messenger of Peace because of his work with developing nations. (Clark) That same year he also traveled with Disarm Education Fund and Direct Relief International, two nonprofits dedicated to the betterment of international lives, to deliver 1.2 Million dollars worth of medicine and medicinal supply to Cuba. He also brought humanitarian aid to the Ivory Coast, made missions to both Afghanistan and North Korea to promote goodwill, and went to South Africa to meet with Nelson Mandela when he was released from prison in 1990. In 1991 during the Gulf War, he also traveled to Iraq to secure the release of American hostages. When he returned to his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky in 2005, "Ali and his wife helped start the Muhammad Ali Center... with the goal of bringing his mission of opportunity and assistance to his community" (5). The point of the center was to promote educational opportunities, gender equality and inspire global citizenship.

Ali was the type of leader to lead by example which shows why so many people loved him. Known as a symbol of hope and peace, he was an honest man who did what he believed was not just best for those close to him but also what was best for those around the world. His authenticity made him an extremely effective leader which can also be shown by the awards he received. In 2005, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom- the highest civilian award in the United States- from President George W. Bush. In 2009 Ali also received the NAACP's President's Award, recognizing his lifetime of public service and humanitarian efforts. An authentic leader is someone who is positive with truthful self-concepts that promote openness. I couldn't think of any better way to describe the life Muhammad Ali lived and exceeded at but as that, an authentic leader.

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