

Sharing her father's story

Joanne Kilgour Dowdy writes about her father who won the Bronze Medal in the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki, Finland

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When Joanne Kilgour Dowdy set out to write a children's book last year she didn't think she would be writing about her father, deceased Olympian Lennox Kilgour.

She had already gathered information from writers and illustrators with experience in writing children's books and was ready to start when she got a strong feeling that the book's focus should be on her famous father.

"I believe it was December 26, my mind told me to start writing a book about (him)," the Kent State University Professor of Adolescent/Adult Literacy recalled.

"It was a pretty demanding process because the whole story was rushing out of me. I just had to keep up with the ideas and the typing process."

Olympic Hero, Lennox Kilgour's Story is the product of Kilgour-Dowdy's months of work. With illustrations by Dillon Sedar, the book is a testimonial to Kilgour's endurance and faith in his ability to excel.

Sedar, a student art teacher at Seiberling Elementary and an art educator/artist at Kent State University in Ohio, USA, was described by Kilgour Dowdy as a gift to her and the project.

"I did pray to Lennox to send me someone who he approved of and wanted to do this journey with me. Dillon accepted my invitation to do the book the very next day."

She added that she and the young artist are of one mind and quickly solve problems creatively by sharing their ideas and negotiating points of view to make decisions.

"Truly this book is as much Dillon's as it is mine. I hope other people see the gem that I have uncovered in his artistry."

Kilgour Dowdy, whose last outing with her autobiography *In the Public Eye* and whose past titles include *Readers of the Quilt: Essays on Being Black, Female and Literate* and *GED Stories*, said Olympic Hero felt like a letter to young people.

"I have written it like a poem, even though it does not look like a poem on the page. It unfolds in episodes, you could say. The illustration helps to make concrete what I am describing in each entry on the page.

“Since it is a children’s book, I wanted them to come away with a “can do” message from the story.

“Certainly I would not be a professor who writes for a living without the example of endurance and self-confidence that I witnessed in my parents.”

When her father won the bronze medal in the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki, Finland she was not yet invented (her words). She had to rely on the book *Trinidad Olympians* written by Dr Basil Ince (who also reviewed her drafts and gave her some advice) and Alec Chapman (who she said was a great support to Ince when he researched on the Olympians) to fill in the blanks.

“I never saw my father compete. I was too young to witness those events. I only saw his barbells and exercise equipment in the small room that he kept at the back of the house on Lucknow Street in St James. This is why doing the research for the book was so important to me.

“I had to unearth the facts of his journey in order to appreciate who he was and what he had accomplished by the time that I met him in the world.”

Kilgour Dowdy felt that her father left her in good hands with Ince and Chapman and others who have provided their pictures and anecdotes

Kilgour died in 1994 but it was only last year that Kilgour Dowdy felt she was ready to deal with his death.

“So when the book is out in 2014 it will be 10 years since we buried him. That seems a good amount of time to adjust to his physical absence.”

Emotionally, writing *Olympic Hero* has been an invigorating journey.

“I always talk to people about Lennox as if he is still physically present when I tell them about episodes in my writing journey. His spirit is very real to me. If people find that strange, that’s okay.”

Although she shares some her father with the world there are some memories of him that she keeps in her heart.

As a girl she would often shine her father’s trophies. She also remembered him riding his bicycle for years before he took to the motorcycle.

“His life as an athlete was all history to me when I start remembering his days with me. He was painting, I was a model for one of his paintings. He was sculpting. I remember the bust he made of Edward Taylor, the former mayor of Port of Spain. (Taylor) was the only person who met Lennox at the airport after he returned from Helsinki with his bronze medal.

“That story is in the children’s book because I use it to show that Lennox did not let that disappointment stop him from pressing on to his next victories as an international athlete.”

The personal stories, Kilgour Dowdy said, are for another book.

“So, now I have new work to look forward doing.”

Comparing Olympic Hero to her past body of work, Kilgour Dowdy thinks this is a treasure that she has been digging for over the last 15 years.

“The academic books got me to this point where I can write from the heart with the joy of knowing that I have my bills covered and no one is going to say that I am escaping my duties as a researcher by doing a children’s book about an athlete.”

She wants people to get that she is promoting all the habits that she has instilled in her pupils – research, collaboration with an illustrator to represent the facts that she is describing and encouraging reading in young people, which she called a daily challenge in this “movie and television culture that we have created”.

The book, which is being published by Caribbean Studies Press is also a film script for a short film that Kilgour Dowdy plans to do when Olympic Hero hit the shelves next year. Once a release date is fixed for the book its author will start talking to people about launching here and the rest of the Caribbean.

“It would be wonderful if readers think of this book as a testimonial to a young man’s faith in himself and that they appreciate the role of learned elders in the lives of those who take on the work of shaping youth for success.

Kilgour Dowdy wrote Olympic Hero with children in Standard 5 to Form 3 in mind but said adults could also learn a thing or two about the local sport hero.

“Every person who has ever celebrated the struggle and victories of our athletes is warmly remembered in this book. I hope and pray that others will pick up their pens and their paint brushes and get busy documenting the lives of our heroes and sheroes for our nation to keep them in their hearts and hands.

“My work is always about community, about celebrating the people in our community and in that spirit I offer another example of the stories that we need to tell and sooner rather than later.”

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