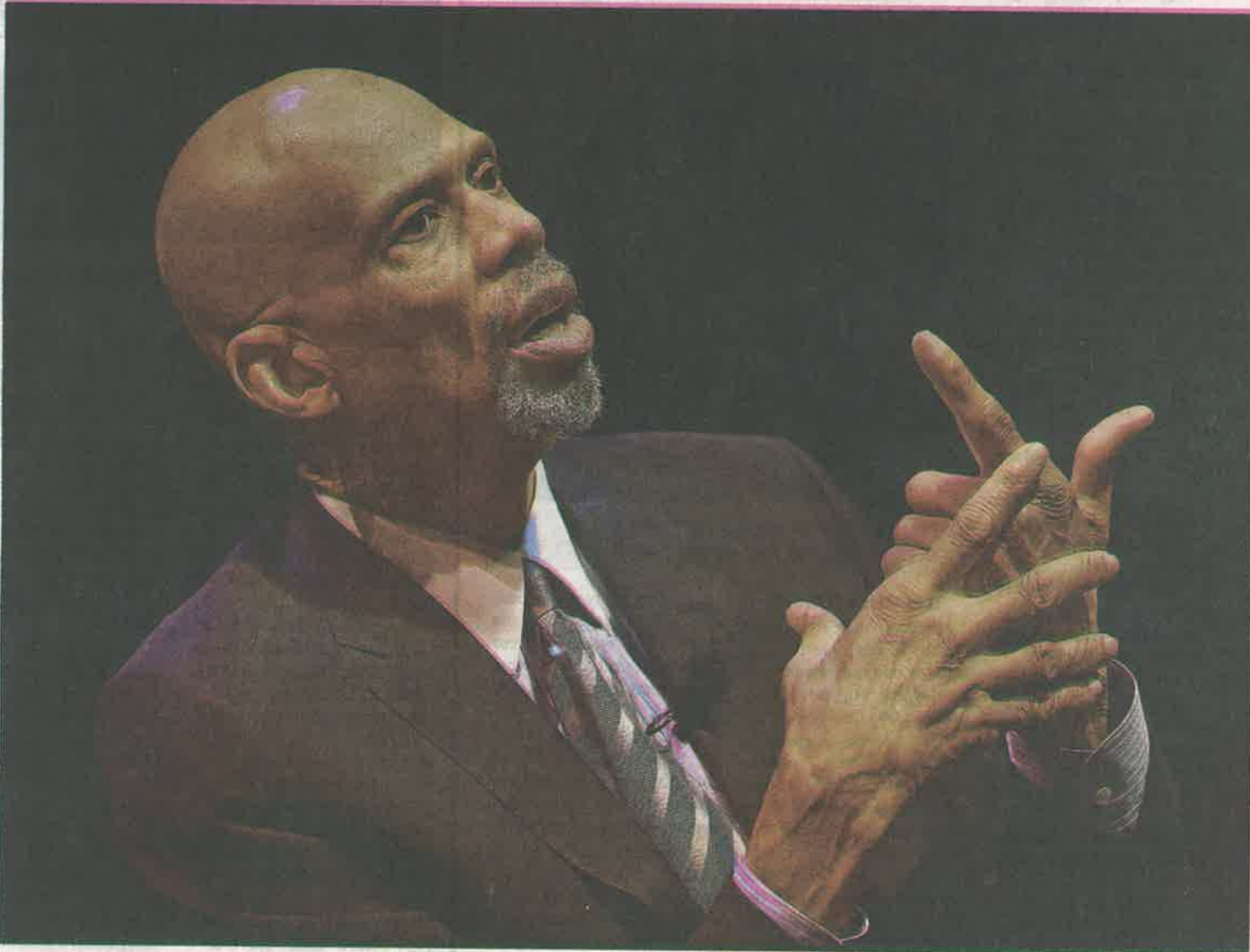


HOOPS AND BOOKS



CATHERINE AVALONE - NEW HAVEN REGISTER

NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar at Southern Connecticut State University, earlier this month, prior to the Read to Grow event.

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Basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar enlightens, edifies at Read to Grow event

By Lisa Reisman

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NEW HAVEN » Toward the end of a lively event at College Street Music Hall last Wednesday, a teenage boy, wearing a Los Angeles Laker purple-and-gold jersey emblazoned with the number 33 and the signature goggles of the featured speaker, asked what he could do to ensure his future in the game.

"First and foremost, learn the fundamentals," said basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who was in conversation with sportscaster Dan Patrick in support of Read to Grow, the Branford-based foundation whose mission is to get books into the hands of children.

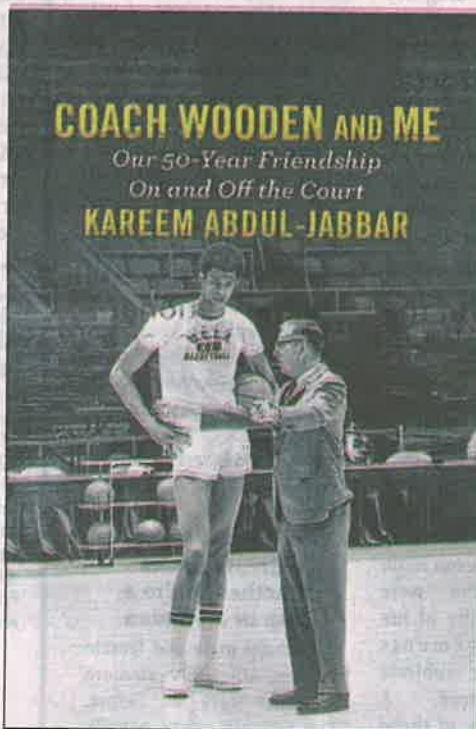
Not coincidentally, perhaps, his answer was a variation on a lesson imparted to him by his former coach, as he writes in his recent "Coach Wooden and Me: Our 50-Year Friendship On and Off the Court," a book about the unlikely but enduring bond between a 7-foot-2-inch black Muslim from Harlem and a 5-foot-10-inch devout Christian from a KKK-controlled area of Indiana.

As John Wooden, who won 10 NCAA titles in a 12-year span and 88 consecutive games as the UCLA coach, taught him, "doing anything well requires that individuals first master the fundamentals." Once they do that, there's the freedom to create and improvise.

That didn't just mean teaching his players to pull up their socks in a way that left no loose flaps inside their sneakers to avoid blisters, and to lace their shoes tight and even to prevent sprained ankles, as the so-called Wizard of Westwood famously did.

It didn't only refer to a distinctive style of play that emphasized quickness, finesse and a jazz-like inventiveness over brute force and strength that, as The Sporting News-named "Greatest Coach of All Time" preached, was only possible with a command of the basic building blocks of the game.

Wooden, a former English teacher,



The book is about the unlikely but enduring bond between a 7-foot-2-inch black Muslim from Harlem and a 5-foot-10-inch devout Christian from a KKK-controlled area of Indiana.

"saw basketball as a temporary vocation, but learning as a life-long one," said the soft-spoken, nattily dressed 70-year-old, who was twice named Player of the Year and played on three championship teams. "He used basketball as a metaphor to teach us about life."

Unlike today's group of college stars, where players see college as a one-year stepping stone to the NBA, "he expected us to get an education and play ball, not one or the other," said the NBA Hall of Fame center and former columnist for Time magazine. "I went to UCLA to get a degree and I got a degree in four years."

Wooden's belief in "education as vital to living a good life," as he put it, is the reason that "so many of the guys that played for him have gone on to become pastors and lawyers and prominent peo-

ple," said Abdul-Jabbar, who's been a basketball coach, actor, and bestselling author since retiring in 1989. It's also why, as he recalled, "at his memorial service,"—Wooden died in 2010 at 99—"we all spoke about the lessons we learned from him rather than the games we had won."

Fittingly, the emphasis on learning is of a piece with some sobering statistics that the Read to Grow Foundation is seeking to reverse.

While "there are 13 books in the household of every non-low income family," its founder and board chairman Roxanne Coady told the audience, "there is only one book for every 300 low-income families."

"That leaves children in these families at a severe disadvantage when they start school," she said, and has an "unfortunate domino effect" of heightening the risk of not finishing high school. Moreover, 43 percent of people with low literacy skills live in poverty, 70 percent of them don't have full-time jobs, and 85 percent of all juvenile offenders have trouble reading.

In the end, it was only natural that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar quoted his friend and mentor in capturing why Read to Grow, and other foundations like it, are so crucial to the future of our children.

"Failing to prepare is preparing to fail," said the 2016 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, who credited his love of reading Robert Louis Stevenson and Alexander Dumas as a child for inspiring him to write.

Or, as he put it to his young fan: "In basketball and in life, you can't do very much without learning the fundamentals. Learn how to pass the ball. Learn how to defend. But make sure you're hitting the books while you're at it."

To donate to Read to Grow, visit www.readtogrow.org. For information about organizing a book drive in your neighborhood, town, workplace, club or group, call 203-488-6800. Signed copies of "Coach Wooden and Me: Our 50-Year Friendship On and Off the Court" available at R.J. Julia Booksellers, 768 Boston Post Road, Madison, 203-245-3959. rjulia.com.