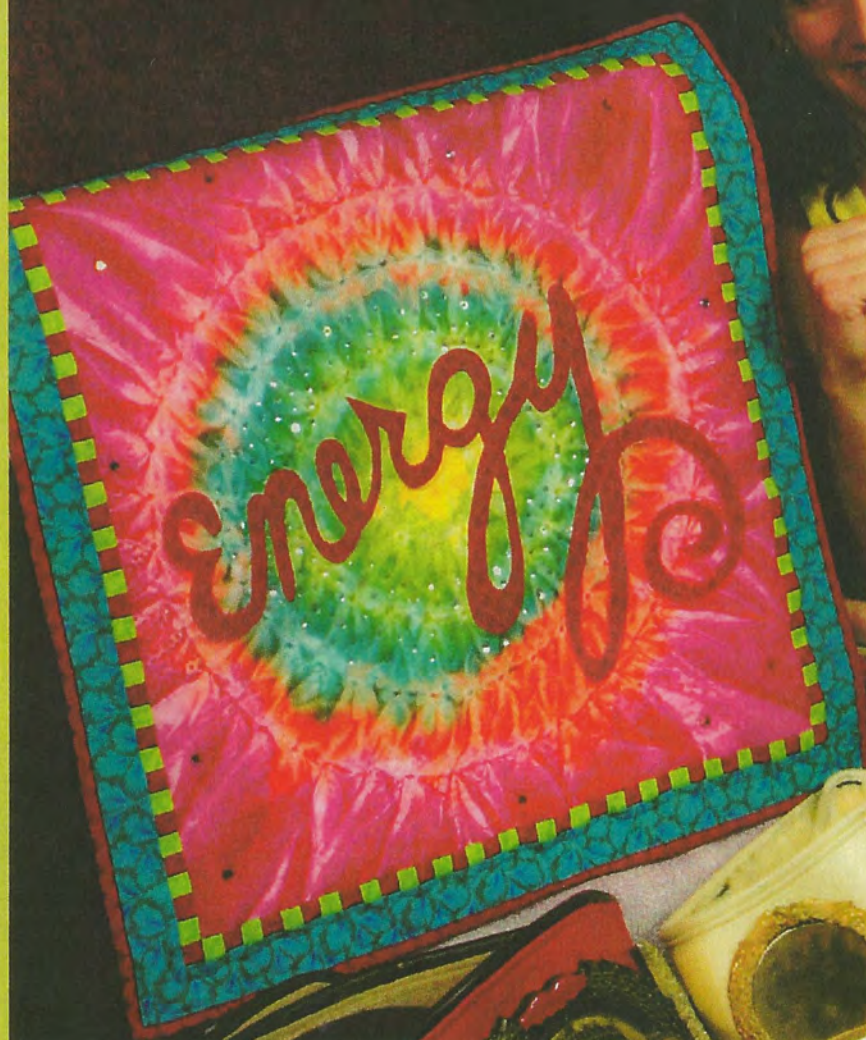




Eye on the prize

Boxing champ Sumya Anani fights to help others

BY KALSEY MCCALL PHOTO BY BETH ALLISON WICKERSON



Sumya Anani is a fighter and a lover. As a four-time world champion women's boxer in three weight divisions, Anani, more commonly known as Island Girl, has defeated big-name women's boxers such as Christy Martin, Andrea DeShong and Dora Webber. But there's more to this athlete than quick reflexes and a mean right hook.

Anani is a yoga instructor, a massage therapist and the mother of one son, Matthew. She also has a heart for helping others. Through her involvement in the world of professional sports, she realized early on that she wanted to live beyond herself and her accomplishments.

"I never wanted my career as an athlete to only serve me," Anani, 33, says. "I've always wanted whatever fame and whatever money that I made to be used to help promote healing in the world."

To that end, Anani started the charity A.C.T. in Johnson County. The acronym, which stands for Awakening Change Together, stems from an inspiration that came to Anani on one of the biggest nights of her life.

"I was never an athlete as a kid," says Anani, a 1990 graduate of Shawnee Mission North High School.

After high school, she attended Johnson County Community College, where she competed on the weightlifting team. One day, while she was lifting weights at a local gym, she was approached by her soon-to-be trainer, Barry Becker.

"He told me I should think about becoming a boxer, and while at first I was taken back, I was interested in his suggestion," Anani says.

After only three weeks of training, Anani made her boxing debut against a woman from Springfield, Mo., and won the match with little struggle.

After taking two years off to live in Jamaica, the period of her life that earned her the ring name Island Girl, Anani came back to Overland Park in 1996 and started to concentrate more heavily on her fighting.

In 1998, Anani faced her biggest challenge yet — a fight with Martin, who many considered to be the best female fighter in the world. Known as "The Coal Miner's Daughter," Martin garnered worldwide attention when she appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and became the first female boxer to sign a million-dollar fight contract.

Anani defeated Martin in 10 brutal rounds, staking her

claim as one of the world's best female boxers.

But it was Martin's post-fight interview that changed Anani's outlook on the world of sports and her purpose in life.

"She was arrogant," Anani says. "All she could talk about was money and herself, and I knew right then that I never wanted to be like that. Professional athletes are very lucky, and we do not deserve to be paid what we are. I always knew there was a reason that I fell in to the world of boxing, and right then I realized what it was. I needed to give back."

So Anani began brainstorming, searching for ways she could bring together her career as a boxer and her giving spirit.

And A.C.T. was born.

Anani started A.C.T. with a handful of friends who would actively look for opportunities to serve the community. Since its inception in 2001, it has evolved into an all-inclusive network of volunteers who seek out ways to serve the community around them.

"A.C.T. is all about community awareness and empowerment," Anani says. "Once a month for two or three hours we offer a volunteer opportunity for the people on our mailing list. And we try to participate in things that families can do together."

A.C.T. has sent volunteers to the Harvesters food bank in Kansas City and the Kansas City Rescue Mission. Also, volunteers have helped a woman who was

diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease clean her house, stenciled storm drains in Overland Park and worked at recycling centers. Currently, Anani is arranging to have a yoga program introduced in the Johnson County Juvenile Detention Center.

And Anani has big plans for 2006, as she hopes to expand A.C.T.'s reach with a radio show or even a television show. She also wants to expand the network of volunteers to reach throughout the metro area and to other cities across the nation.

"I really want to build A.C.T. into a very successful organization where people can pool their unique talents, contributions and assets to making the community a better place," Anani says. "It's not about me, it's about us. What we as a community can do is far more beneficial than what I can do."

For more information on A.C.T., visit www.sumya.com. ■

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