

A Q&A WITH KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

Tell us a little bit about the Skyhook Foundation and its mission.

KAJ: The Skyhook Foundation's purpose is to use sports to encourage kids to pursue higher education. By mentoring young athletes, we can use their interest in sports to share an important message about the value of education. We hope that by getting these kids to think about what happens beyond their athletic careers, we can encourage them to bear down academically and become achievers in the classroom.

Describe your work with National Council for Social Studies. Why do you think it is vital for schools to emphasize the importance of history in the classroom?

KAJ: The most important thing about history is how much fun it is. When I used to sit around with my kids and show them scrapbooks of my family and me when we were younger, they'd laugh and make jokes about how goofy our clothes and haircuts were. History is like a giant scrapbook of humanity growing up. It's okay to laugh and make jokes, because that's where the learning starts. My kids might ask, "Why was your hair like that?" and I could explain that the Afro was a symbol of black pride. Then you can explain the civil rights movement, the Civil War, slavery, and so on. Once kids see their own connection to history, they can use it to avoid making the same mistakes that our ancestors made.

What Color Is My World? is your first book for young children. What was the genesis of the story idea?

KAJ: I was looking for a good way to make kids aware of how many objects in their daily lives were invented by African Americans. I wanted kids to have an appreciation for the cultural and ethnic diversity that makes so many comforts and necessities in their lives possible. A lot of kids think that Thomas Edison and other white guys invented everything, when in fact there were a lot more people involved who were a lot more colors of the rainbow.

Of all the underrepresented contributors to U.S. and African-American history, why did you choose to highlight inventors?

KAJ: Two reasons. First, I wanted kids to get excited about science and engineering as possible fields of study. The U.S. has been slipping over the years in our dominance in scientific discoveries. But we can show young kids that a career

in science can be just as cool as becoming a pro athlete or a famous actor, and that it can affect the world a lot more. Second, I want kids to be inspired by these inventors, most of who had to overcome extreme obstacles to achieve their dreams. Most of them were motivated not by the promise of big bucks and endorsements, but by their own natural curiosity and a desire to improve the world.

During the writing and research process for What Color Is My World?, were there any interesting or little known facts that surprised you?

KAJ: Every time somebody picks up a potato chip, they should be thanking a black chef named George Crumb. It's not just the chip they should think of, but also how this black man, at a time when it was safer to just do what was asked of him, invented the potato chip by standing up to one of the richest men in America. I love it when accidents change history.

What do you want readers to take away from this book?

KAJ: I hope that young readers will get an idea about how much black Americans have done to significantly contribute to everyday American life and culture.

If there was one thing you wished you had invented, what would it be?

KAJ: A time machine.

What is the one thing you wish would be invented in your lifetime?

KAJ: Flying cars.

What's one of the questions you get asked most by kids that is not basketball related?

KAJ: Kids don't ever seem to ask me anything that isn't basketball related!

