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photo: Howard Bingham

The former heavyweight boxing champion of the world - arguably the most famous human on the planet - was slouching in an armchair yesterday afternoon in Yank Barry's house in downtown Montreal. Having just arrived from Michigan via Cincinnati, he was about to fly to Paris and on to West Africa. No wonder Muhammad Ali looked exhausted.

"We're going out there to help the Mother Teresa that nobody knows about," Barry explained. A former sports agent, record producer and lead singer with '60s band The Kingsmen, he's now the chairman of a Montreal-based company, Global Village Champions Foundation, that specializes in soy-based replacement foods. The company is poised for a big North American launch.

"Sister Beltran is 78 years old, half-blind and handicapped by polio. She left Atlanta for Liberia 20 years ago. Now she's desperately trying to help these abandoned Liberian refugee children across the border in the Ivory Coast."

Which is why Muhammad Ali was sitting in Barry's office, a heavy presence in dark pants and a green shirt, near a large picture of his younger self. One of Ali's many goodwill ventures has been the establishment of Global Village Champions - composed mainly of athletes (sprinter Michael Johnson, football player Eric Dickerson) and musicians (Gary U.S. Bonds, Ben E. King) who are willing to combine entrepreneurial risk with humanitarian goodwill.

Global Village Champions Foundation works with big charities, such as CARE, but it's not a charity itself. Its annual revenues exceed \$350 million. The company's website speaks of "high-profile humanitarian relief" in the same breath as "unprecedented star power" and "mega-event marketing."

Yesterday evening, Bonds, Barry, Ali and several other Global Village types would be on their way to Sister Beltran's remote village in the Ivory Coast. They were taking medicines, wheelchairs, crutches and toys on board the plane.

Ali's eyes remained half-closed, the result, no doubt, of his advanced Parkinson's disease. "The conditions among the children are terrible," Barry said: "Amputations, deformities. ..."

Suddenly Ali spoke up, his voice slurred almost beyond comprehension. The only recognizable word was help. An assistant translated: "That's why we're trying to help."

The 480 refugee children in Sister Beltran's care are victims of a terrible civil war in Liberia. It has orphaned them and devastated their homeland. Now, in Ivory Coast, the refugees live in squalor, without the right to houses or a permanent school building.

"Wherever I go with Muhammad," Barry said, "I can't relate the incredible love that people have for him. They come out in their tens of thousands, and somehow he touches every one of them."

Silence. "Let's go!" Ali clearly said. Everyone in the room roared with a laughter tinged by relief.

Awake now, Ali showed off a pair of simple magic tricks. He made a ball of pink wool vanish. He made another appear in my hand. "Land," he said, and Barry, on cue, explained how the president of the Ivory Coast has promised to give the refugees a small amount of land.

Then, without warning, Ali began to snore.

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"Hi, guys," Celine Dion announced an hour later to the hubbub of photographers waiting in front of Le Mirage, a private golf club near Terrebonne. Her husband, Rene Angelil, is a co-owner of the club. When Angelil joined her, his remnants of gray hair stuffed into a tiny ponytail, Dion lovingly rearranged his white Global Village shirt.

A pair of stretch limousines pulled up in front of the clubhouse. The camera crew from Entertainment Tonight swung into action.

Yank Barry emerged. Two underlings emerged. Finally, a door opened and, with some difficulty, Muhammad Ali stepped out into the hot afternoon light. Dion rushed to embrace him: "This is home. Welcome home."

Ali moved slowly up the steps like some lumbering bear newly awakened from hibernation. Dion led him - plus a retinue of followers - into a small dining room overlooking the course.

They had met last spring at the Academy Awards. Dion sang two songs - her own, plus Barbra Streisand's - and Ali celebrated the Oscar triumph of *When We Were Kings*, a documentary about one of his earlier trips to Africa: the 1974 fight against George Foreman in Zaire. Now Dion was poised to join the ranks of Global Village Champions.

Dion acted the gracious hostess as Barry, Ali and their entourage prepared to leave for the Ivory Coast by consuming a sumptuous early dinner. Ali had changed into a red Global Village shirt. He sat down heavily, the still point of the turning world, letting the excited crowd flow around him.

Then, with Barry's help, he presented Dion and Angelil with a pair of red boxing gloves. Dion pretended to punch Ali in the face. The shutters clicked away like a mechanical heart.

"He loves it," confided the singer Gary U.S. Bonds, a board member of Global Village Champions Foundation. "You can't get him away. Everybody else will be waiting, cars will be waiting, planes will be waiting, and Muhammad's saying, 'Just a moment.'"

Plates of smoked salmon, canapes and peeled shrimp appeared on the table. Canadiens captain Vincent Damphousse walked in, and Barry introduced him to Ali. The champion had no idea who Damphousse was, but he shook his hand amiably.

When a safe interval had elapsed, Mario Tremblay followed in Damphousse's wake, removing a white golf glove to pump Ali's hand. The former Canadiens coach not only looked sunburnt; he also looked relaxed.

Now and then Ali's dark eyes flashed fire. The poetry has left him; the graceful moves have left him; but the intelligence (and the ego) remain. The eyes still float like a butterfly. The eyes still sting like a bee.

After a few minutes, Barry wandered out to the terrace. Fountains were playing in four artificial lakes. "I'm nervous," he admitted. "There's so many logistical difficulties out there in the Ivory Coast. So many things that are out of our hands."

Dion came out to speak to the Entertainment Tonight cameras: "To meet Muhammad today is very, very touching. He has a really big heart. I'm very impressed to know him. I'm very honoured that he's here in Montreal."

The wind rose, sending high clouds sweeping across the sky. Two crows flew over the 18th green.

"He's giving all his heart," Dion said, "and I just want to join him. What Muhammad is doing is really wonderful. To me he's not a boxer. To me he's a human fighter."

Back inside the clubhouse, Ali had regained some energy. "Celine got him totally rejuvenated," Barry said with delight. "He's calling Celine 'mom.'" Table napkin around his neck, he and a dozen other people were watching a video of *When We Were Kings*.

It was time to head off to Mirabel airport for the night flight across the Atlantic. "We gotta go, Muhammad," Barry called. But Dion was posing for another picture hugging Ali. His mouth barely moved, though his eyes were smiling. As the pair emerged into the clubhouse, Dion was grasping Ali by an arm and humming the Wedding March.

When he embraced Dion, the quaver in Ali's left hand almost disappeared.