

## TRANSCRIPT – YOUR POSTAL PODCAST – AUGUST 2016

**Diedre Tillery:** Welcome to *Your Postal Podcast*. I'm Diedre Tillery. In this edition, you'll hear from a Seattle woman about how she began a three-decades-plus pen pal relationship with an American sports icon.

In 1981, 10-year-old Stephanie Meade penned a letter to her and her disabled father's favorite boxer and placed it in an envelope she stamped and simply addressed to "Muhammad Ali, Los Angeles California." Less than a month later, a handwritten response from the iconic athlete was just the start of more than 30 years of letters between Meade and Ali.

Ernie Swanson had the chance to talk with Stephanie Meade about this life-changing communication between a girl and a legend via the mail.

**Ernie Swanson:** As a young girl, Stephanie Meade became a huge fan of heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali. She anxiously watched many of his bouts on TV with her father. At about age 10, she decided to write Ali a letter and share her feelings with him. Living near Seattle, Stephanie launched what would become a 30-year pen pal relationship with Ali.

**Stephanie Meade:** I felt the connection and in my little-girl mind I just felt like he was my friend. And every time he would look into the camera I thought he was talking to me and I thought he was smiling to me. And so I just decided I was going to write him a letter and tell him that. Tell him that I thought he was my friend and tell him that I thought he was the greatest and all of that. So that's what I did.

**Swanson:** Stephanie's family told her she was wasting her time and that Ali would never respond to her letter.

**Meade:** Most of them made fun of me and they told me that, they said, "Stephanie, things like this don't happen. You know, he's the biggest sports figure in the world. The letter will never even reach him. He'll never read it. He'll never write back to you." And I think they were trying to prepare me for this ultimate letdown that they saw coming. And I remember thinking well maybe things like that don't happen for you, but they're going to happen for me. And I never doubted it even once. I had this absolute faith that Muhammad Ali was going to write back to me. But my family certainly did not.

**Swanson:** She didn't have an address for Ali, but she read in a magazine that he lived in Los Angeles. So she sent her letter simply to: "Muhammad Ali, Los Angeles, California."

**Meade:** That's one of the most interesting aspects of the story, because I didn't have an address at all. The only reason I even knew remotely where to send the letter was because I had seen a little clip from a *People* magazine of him coming out of a restaurant. And it said, "Muhammad Ali leaves a certain restaurant in Los Angeles, California." So I wrote nothing more on the envelope than "Muhammad Ali, Los Angeles, California." And so God bless the Postmaster or postal worker who got my letter to him, because that's the only thing that was on there. I didn't have a ZIP Code or street address or anything and it made it there.

**Swanson:** Stephanie patiently checked the family's mailbox every day hoping for a response from the champion. After about three weeks her dream was answered and she got a letter from the champ, much to the amazement of her family.

**Meade:** Every day I would walk to the end of the street and I would look in the mailbox expecting to see my letter and, you know, it wouldn't be there that day. And I was never disappointed because I just thought, well, tomorrow it will be here. So my dad was watching me walk to the end of the driveway. I think he just felt so sad for his daughter that I was going to the mailbox expecting this letter from Muhammad Ali and it was just never going to be there. But I would just walk back and say, well I'll check again tomorrow. And then three weeks to the day from when I sent my letter, there was a handwritten letter from Muhammad Ali in my mailbox. And he had even handwritten the envelope and made it out to me.

**Swanson:** She wrote letters monthly to Ali, still without a complete address, counting on the Postal Service to come through for her. And he responded to each of her letters, with a handwritten, personalized note referencing things she said in her letters to him.

**Meade:** I would tell him all the things that went on in my life. I would tell him secrets. Actually I told him things that to this day I never told anyone else. I would send him copies of my report card. I would send my class pictures. I would tell him about my life because he was my best friend. And he would write back without fail every single time. And in one of his letters to me he said, "Thank you for your picture. I will keep it with me always." And he always wrote in his letters something that made me feel he was in the friendship as well.

**Swanson:** Stephanie had a chance to meet her idol. She heard he was going to be in Seattle on a promotional tour. She showed up outside the venue which was filled with celebrities and news media. She cleverly talked her way into the building.

**Meade:** It was around 1991, and I had read that he was going to be honored. And so I showed up there with nothing more than one of the letters he had written to me. And I went to one of the security guards and handed him my letter and said, "Muhammad Ali is my friend, and I want to meet him." And he said, "Wait here." And so a few moments later he said, "Come with me, Muhammad wants you." I ran to him and I threw my arms around him, and just the most incredible moment. He was so kind and I think I spent about an hour-and-a-half with him. The room was filled with celebrities – Joe Frazier, Ken Norton, Mike Tyson. Everyone was there to honor Muhammad Ali. He didn't care. You know, I was this girl that nobody knew and nobody cared about. But, Muhammad Ali cared about me. Anything good that you could possibly imagine him to be, he was, and much, much more.

**Swanson:** Ali died in June at the age of 74 from Parkinson's disease. As the disease worsened, Ali was no longer able to write Stephanie, but she continued to send him letters.

**Meade:** His wife Lonnie was so wonderful to me, you know, and she said, "Stephanie, keep writing and I'll read the letters to him. I'll make sure he gets the letters." So even though he wasn't able to respond to me anymore, she made sure my letters were reaching him. So I continued to send letters and cards every month because I wanted him to know that the relationship was still there and I still loved him.

**Tillery:** And now, here's some of the latest postal news:

You'll soon be able to use stamps that boldly go where no stamps have gone before on your letters and cards. Nearly 50 years to the day since the original show's first airing, the new *Star Trek* Forever Stamps will be issued by the U.S. Postal Service at a September 2<sup>nd</sup> New York City ceremony.

At high noon, the release of the stamps will officially launch *Star Trek: Mission New York*, a three-day celebration expected to draw thousands of Trekkies and Trekkers. If you can't make it to New York for the event, fear not: You can pre-order the stamps at [usps.com/shop](https://usps.com/shop) starting in early August, for delivery just after September 2nd.

The *Star Trek* Forever stamps, produced under license by CBS Consumer Products, feature digital illustrations including the famed Starship Enterprise.

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