



Peaceful warriors

Sumya Anani is a contradiction — a therapist, a student of spirituality and a fighter. Now her son is on a similar path.

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A woman sits on a soft blue mat, her legs crossed, eyes closed. Her face is weathered but youthful, her dark black hair is kempt but curly. This is a yoga studio, covered in flowing silks and handcrafted art, a basement sanctuary in a dome building that looks like a spaceship.

The room is dark and peaceful, and, finally, Sumya Anani begins to recite a long prayer.

"We see a world," she says. "...Where our teachers prepare others to respect all life... where soldiers and fighters are a thing of the past, because all humanity has finally, without any provocation whatsoever, seen that fighting and violence has never given them the results they are looking for."

Two fighters stand on hard carpeting, eyes focused, spit flying. A young man circles a heavy bag, slamming his boxing gloves into the padding with a ferocious thwack. A few steps away, a woman stands watch and confidently shells out encouragement. This is a boxing gym, filled with weights and punching bags, a basement sanctuary in a small white house in Mission.

The room is harshly lit, and pop music from an old black stereo fills the air. Finally, Sumya Anani sees something she likes. Her son has just connected with a flawless body shot, a crushing punch that could fracture a rib or rattle a kidney.

"Good, Matthew," Sumya says.

How, then, do you start the story of Sumya and Matthew Anani?

How about May 1990, high school graduation at [Shawnee Mission North](#), where an 18-year-old Sumya, pregnant and insecure, picked up her diploma with a tender knot in her stomach? Or maybe five years later, on the sands of Jamaica, where Sumya, a single mother, hauled her preschool-aged son on a great island adventure. Surely, this would explain why the pair grew so

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JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani and her son Matthew Anani embrace the yin and yang of being peaceful warriors.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani, left, and her son Matthew Anani.

tight, why Sumya says the two have always been more like brother and sister; screaming and yelling one minute, laughing and hugging the next.

No, Sumya Anani says. That's just part of it. You'll have to know more.

Best to start here, in the yoga studio at 4711 Lamar Ave., where Sumya is standing near a glass case. Inside are photos and mementos, organized into a loose chronology, and they start to explain how Sumya arrived here, a 39-year-old woman talking about boxing and motherhood, the past and present.

The story is long, nearly implausible at times, and filled with contradictions.

"Yin and yang," Sumya says.

For the past two decades, Anani has been a hero and a villain; a four-time world champion boxer, and a vicious no-name who nearly killed an opponent in the ring. She's been a mother who worked as a card dealer in Jamaica to support her 4-year-old son; and a loyal partner to a white-haired carpet salesman with a lyrical name — Barry Becker — that probably belongs in a black-and-white boxing movie.

She's been a pugilist and therapist, warrior and healer, and an aerial yoga instructor with a shelf full of books that preach the virtues of holistic medicine and the power of theology and thought.

"Have you ever read 'As a Man Thinketh' by James Allen?" she will ask, digressing from a conversation about spirituality. "You haven't? I wish I had an extra copy to give you."

But today, Sumya Anani says, she would rather be known as something else: Mother.

A few miles away, in another corner of suburbia, Matthew is back home in the family's basement boxing gym, the one with a ring and ropes and everything else. He's 21 now, and in a few minutes, he will begin another workout; another day in the Anani family pastime.

Matthew Anani pops the four-minute highlight reel into the DVD player and pushes play. Barry Becker and Sumya Anani take their places on basement couches. Becker says you have to see this.

The story of Sumya Anani, the boxer, has now begun.

It started with a single mother inside a fitness club in Overland Park. One day, Becker, an old amateur boxer with a love for fighting, spotted a dark-haired 22-year-old working out.

"Why don't you do something with those muscles....," he said. "You should be a fighter."

Sumya Anani had little reason to listen. She was not a fighter. She was a mother. And when she wasn't busy nurturing her young son, she was a blackjack dealer at a local casino. She studied yoga and thought about life. Fighting? No thanks.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani hangs from a silk as she demonstrates a move for an Aerial Silks class she teaches at Learning2Fly, 4711 Lamar, in Mission.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani and her son Matthew Anani use the medicine ball during a workout at home.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani, left, watches her son Matthew Anani workout on the bag in their home.



Anani would soon decide to move to Jamaica. She was still young. And she could find work there. And more important: She could bring along her young son.

"If I'm gonna do something crazy like this," Sumya thought, "this is the time to do it."

The months in Jamaica would make mother and son even closer. They were outsiders, in love with the country and culture, but never totally at ease, either.

"It was tough on her," Matthew says. "Being a single mother, raising her kid."

When Sumya and Matthew returned to the U.S., Becker was still there with the offer.

The highlight tape has started now, and Sumya is on the screen. Becker can't stop coaching.

"Watch the overhand right," he says. "That's the baddest woman on the planet she's backing up right there."

Matthew sits on the couch and watches. He always watched. When Sumya battered Christy Martin — the only women's boxer ever put on the cover of Sports Illustrated — in 1998, Matthew was still in elementary school.

Sometimes he would bring friends over to look at the makeshift boxing ring in the basement.

He never took it seriously, though. There were other things to do. A couple of seasons of football at Shawnee Mission North. Wrestling. Radio and TV classes. Sure, there were the times he would escape to the basement and spend a couple of minutes hitting the bags. And, sure, there was that time in middle school when Becker used Matthew as a sparring partner for his mother.

"I fought a girl who was real fast," Sumya says, "and Matthew had real fast hands."

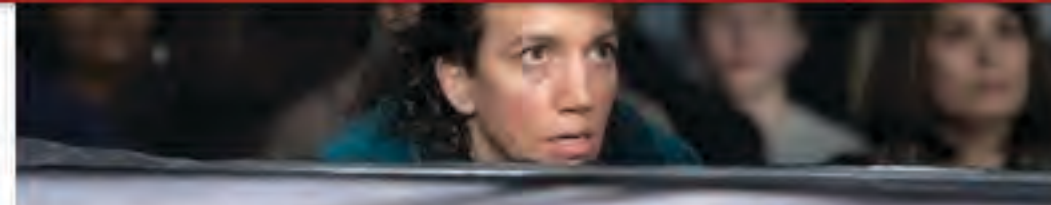
But for so many years, boxing was his mother's domain. Then, nearly two years ago, Matthew took a summer job at FedEx. He would spend nights packing trailers in 100-degree heat and arrive home exhausted and fatigued.

"I realized I needed to get back into shape," Matthew says.

The easiest fix: Return to the basement. Hit the bags again. And this time, do it for real. Matthew had conversations with his mother. By this time, Sumya and Barry were in a longtime relationship. They'd all lived in that white house near Shawnee Mission North for nearly a decade. If Matthew needed boxing guidance, he wouldn't have to go far.

"Well," Sumya would say, "if you're gonna do it, you're gonna have to really take it serious. You're gonna have to train."

Matthew would spar for just three months before entering his first tournament.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani watches from ringside as her son Matthew competes during Saturday's RNE Boxing Club amateur show.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani, right, instructs a class on Aerial Silks she teaches at Learning2Fly, 4711 Lamar, in Mission.



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Matthew Anani (right) competes against Eddie Chavez, in the 175 weight class during Saturday's RNE Boxing Club amateur show.



at the KC Golden Gloves last year. He won the 165-pound division. A few months later, in August, he moved up to 178 pounds and entered the Ringside World Championships. He won again.

Becker taught him a familiar style. Overhand left. Overhand right. The ability to fight from both sides, to knock out opponents from all angles.

"The magic style," Becker says. "...the same style I taught Sumya."

Stop the fight. Why aren't they stopping this fight? It's Dec. 11, 1996, two weeks before Christmas, and Sumya is in the ring at the Firefighters Union Hall in St. Joseph.

Sumya is winning, her windmill style bloodying her opponent's face with relentless efficiency. After every round, Becker looks toward the ring — and then toward the opposite corner.

Why aren't they stopping this fight? he remembers thinking.

The fight doesn't stop. Sumya keeps punching, a 37-year-old woman named Katie Dallam keeps absorbing blows. And by the end of the night, when Dallam's corner finally threw in the towel, Sumya had dished out 119 blows to Dallam's head.

Minutes after the fight, Dallam would collapse, her brain bleeding, her life in peril. She would survive, but the memory would leave scars.

"If that lady would have died," Becker says now, "I'm telling you, we wouldn't have ever been the same."

A second later, Sumya cuts in.

"I was never the same," Sumya says.

Even now, all these years later, Sumya's voice starts to speed up when she replays the night in her head. There was guilt, of course, and she almost left the sport. Then, a few years later, the wounds were re-opened with the release of the boxing movie, "Million Dollar Baby." Dallam was supposedly the inspiration for the film, and the story went national.

To this day, Sumya says the story wasn't told fully. It was Dallam's first fight. But it was only Sumya's fourth. And few knew at the time, Sumya says, that Dallam was in a car accident the night before the fight.

And to this day, that night leads to another contradiction: Boxing gave Sumya confidence; it gave her Barry; and it now gives her another reason to grow even closer to Matthew. But it also provided some of the most profound heartache of her life.

You ask Sumya about boxing's violent nature — if she worries when her only son walks into the ring.

"I'm more nervous when he's in there," Sumya says, "than when I was in there."



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Matthew Anani is following his footsteps into boxing. Here he is shown in 2004 when he was 13 helping his mother, Sumya Anani the No. 2 ranked women boxer in the world, with a drink between workout rounds in their basement gym.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani talks with trainer Barry Becker during Saturday's RNE Boxing Club amateur show.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani warms up her son Matthew for his fight during Saturday's RNE Boxing Club amateur show Saturday.



The highlight tape is almost over. It's pushing toward dusk on a Saturday in January, and screaming from the television, you can hear a ring announcer make a final call, including Sumya's Jamaican-inspired nickname.

"Sum-y-ah 'The Is-land Girl' Ah-NAN-ee!"

The DVD fades to black. There's silence for a second before Sumya speaks up.

"Matt-hew 'Peaceful Warrior' An-NAN-ee."

The family returns to the basement gym. There are still a few things to work on. There's a plan in place. On Feb. 27, in Fort Carson, Colo., Matthew will take part in the USA Boxing National Championships. The winners from seven different weight classes, including Matthew's light-heavyweight division, will represent the United States in the final international Olympic qualifier in May in Brazil.

It is perhaps a pipe dream. Matthew is a perfect 9-0 in his short amateur career. But he will be taking on more experienced fighters with more ring time and more amateur success. Still, Becker is optimistic. He's already guided Anani to a world championship in the professional ranks. Perhaps there's something about the family or that secret style.

"Every fight, he gets so much better," Becker says. "I've never seen anybody learn that quick. I thought he'd be this far maybe a couple years down the road."

As Becker says this, all three stand together in the basement. Mother, son and trainer. Matthew holds a belt from one of his titles last year.

"There are some times I feel like maybe he'd listen more if I wasn't the mom," Sumya says. "But sometimes, I think he does listen more because I am the mom and I've been through it."

And now, Sumya says, they're going through it together. Just like those days in Jamaica. Just like the times Matthew would serve as a water boy during his mom's training sessions.

Sumya looks at Matthew, her baby — and the final contradiction. She spent his whole childhood introducing him to yoga and spirituality, hoping that this dark-haired boy would turn into a sensitive and caring man. Now she is here, away from the yoga studio, back in the boxing gym, surrounded by a culture of violence.

This, she says, is her creation, her hope. A peaceful warrior.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Friends take pictures of Matthew Anani (center) with his mother Sumya and Barry Becker following Matthew's win in the 175 pound weight class during Saturday's RNE Boxing Club i Shawnee.



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

Sumya Anani talks to her son Matthew as he prepares for Saturday's RNE Boxing Club amateur show, 7391 Quivira Road in Shawnee on Saturday.