

DAILY NEWS

KNICKS

Life and education reach beyond sports at the Earl Monroe New Renaissance Basketball School

By Tony Paige
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There are famous names on many buildings throughout New York City. Buildings named after politicians, businessmen and philanthropists are numbered in the hundreds.

And it's rare when a building is named after a living, breathing icon.

If you were asked to identify the building with Vernon Monroe's name on it, you might scratch your head.

If told his full name was Vernon Earl Monroe, as in Earl "The Pearl," a few things might click into place.

But wait, the Knicks' Earl The Pearl? He has a building named after him? Where?

We remember Earl "The Pearl" Monroe, the dazzling Hall of Famer, with his bag of spins, dips and sleights of hand on the hardwood and a member of the Knicks last world championship squad, teaming with another Hall of Famer, backcourt mate Walt "Clyde" Frazier.

So, what is his name doing on a building? Is there a plaque on the side of Madison Square Garden?

No. Monroe's nomenclature is located about 10 miles from the Garden at the Earl Monroe New Renaissance High School (EMNRHS) in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx.

The two-year old charter high school isn't a basketball factory that tries to herd kids to an unrealistic NBA career. This school stresses core classes with an emphasis on careers off the court, because not everyone can dunk or hit a three.

"We have a good number of students who came to the school because it's a good school," noted Brandon Corley, executive director of EMNRHS. "They don't have any interest in [playing] basketball but have a lot of interests in a lot of places and we want to see where your interests lie outside the game and where can there be marriage."

There's more to the game of basketball than the no-look pass.

"We have a fashion club that's invested in how to create uniforms and warmup apparel," stated Corley, born in Chicago and living in Mt. Vernon with his wife and two children. "We have an established journalism class looking at the different elements of journalism. A lot of what they are focused on is the print side and we've had a few students express interest in photography.

"We've had students who wanted to know more about physical therapy and about being an agent."



BRONX, NY - October 6: Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for the Earl Monroe School on October 6, 2021, Bronx, New York.
(Photo by Mike Lawrence for the Earl Monroe School) (Mike Lawrence for the Earl Monroe School/Mike Lawrence for the Earl Monroe School)

So how did this school, located in the Bronx and facilitating 200 students and about 45 teachers, get off the ground?

This is the dream of Brooklynite Dan Klores. He made his mark with his company Dan Klores Communications representing the likes of Jennifer Lopez and Howard Stern then got into film-making creating such flicks as Crazy Love, Ring of Fire: The Emile Griffith Story, and ESPN documentaries Black Magic, on civil rights and basketball, and Winning Time: Reggie Miller vs. the New York Knicks.

He is a basketball junkie at heart but wanted more from the sport.

“Why can’t there be a specialized high school for basketball, but not for the playing of games?” wondered Klores, 73 and a graduate of Lincoln High in Brooklyn while growing up on Coney Island. “We’ve got Oak Hill and IMG [Academies]. That’s not what we need.”

Klores got the school’s charter six years ago and have 100 students in both the freshman and sophomore classes.

“We will teach you if you want to be a broadcaster, if you want to be in print and digital media, if you want to be a nutritionist, a physical therapist, if you want to be in analytics,” declared Klores, now on a roll about his dream come reality. “You want to own a team, you want to be an agent, you want to be a lawyer, you want to have a role in arena entertainment, or food services or psychology, anything that has to do with the ecosystem of the game of basketball and not sports.

“Why basketball? Basketball is a city game.”

Enter Earl “The Pearl” Monroe, born in Philly, whose background is basketball and education.

“I didn’t know Earl was an education major (at Winston-Salem State University) until I became a part of this school,” said Corley. Monroe also passed the national teaching exam, but why this endeavor?

Simple. Monroe wanted to help.

“With the pandemic, there’s been a deemphasis on education, on getting back into the schools,” stated Monroe. “A lot of kids that come to our school, are two years behind in terms with their reading, their math. When we started doing this, we never thought about pulling kids up as opposed to pushing them along. We learned as we go here.

“We’re only in our second year, but we’ve done so many things and uplifted a lot of these kids and when we uplift those kids, we uplift those families as well.”



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Monroe hopes to be an example even if his name is not familiar to the students.

“These kids they don’t know me. Don’t know anything about me,” noted Monroe with a chuckle, “but the fact that this is the name of their school. Some have done research and when I go to the school they see me and smile and want to shake hands. Just the smiles on their faces as they walk through the halls shows they’re much more confident.”

When Monroe’s college team captured the Division II National Championship in 1967, he did not get to bask in the adoration. First things first.

“I couldn’t come back with the team because the next day I had to take the national teacher’s examination,” he recalled. “The rest of the team came back to all the accolades, and I was stuck taking a test. By the time I graduated, I knew the direction I was going.”

And education played a major part.

“My biggest thing was getting a degree regardless of whether I played basketball later on,” declared Monroe, now 78. “I wanted to do it not only for me but do it for my mother. I was spurred on by the love of my mother.”

“She only saw me play two times. It was too nerve racking for her, but she came down to Winston-Salem for my graduation. As proud as she was of me, I was just as proud of her for me. It’s a great thing in my life.”

A story in the Daily News (Dec. 8) stated that 14 percent of all New Yorkers live in poverty with the most in the Bronx. Klores hopes the school will change the perception.

“We attacked it with a private sector mentality,” he stated. “The average reading [level] now is seven and a half. We took our resources and hired eight full-time literacy enrichment teachers that teach reading and writing, comprehension, pronunciation, phonics. Thirty five percent of our kids are classified as special needs.”

And when you started two years ago?

“When they got in the school and we gave them the first standard literacy reading exam, they were at the fourth grade [level],” he noted. “Fifty percent were reading fourth, third, second, first and kindergarten levels. The same thing with math.

“If we do this right in the South Bronx,” Klores predicted, “we can be an anchor tenant to inspire investment in commercial real estate, residential real estate, as a home for artists. That’s why I did it there.”

With the support from the Gates Foundation, Nike, Gatorade, Dick’s Sporting Goods and New York teams like the Yankees and Knicks, the school may be around for a while.

“We have a Board of Trustees and a Board of Advisors,” Klores said. Just look at the names.

It’s as impressive as it gets with 88 advisors, ranging from former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley to Hall of Fame broadcaster Marv Albert, and 16 Trustees including retired NBA player and lawyer Len Elmore and William Wesley (aka World Wide West), president of the Knicks.

The goal is to get these students to the next level of life and possibly be the next Bradley, Albert, Elmore or Wesley.

Even current Knick All-Star Julius Randle saw a future in the school. Eighteen months ago, Randle pledged \$500 for every 3-pointer he made the last two seasons. The “30-for-3” program, matched by individuals from around the Tri-state area, raised \$880,000, which Randle presented to the school in a ceremony on Tuesday.

“Soon we will be the best school, in the country,” stated Brandon Corley. “Then we’ll feel bad for everybody trying to catch up to us.”

Everything is on track for the new school's groundbreaking in February in the South Bronx near 154th Street and Third Avenue and the grand reopening in 2025, but the job is not complete.

"While we are in good shape," acknowledged Corley, "we are going to continue to grow. We know that some needs are likely going to pop up and we are not prepared for, so we are constantly looking and accepting more donations and more support from wherever they can come from."

A Few Pearls From Earl

Earl Monroe (aka Black Jesus) is a member of the Knicks fraternity that actually has the numbers and a ring to back it up.

Monroe is a four-time All Star, 1968 Rookie-of-the-Year, 1973 NBA champ and a team member of the 50 and 75 Greatest Players in NBA History. He still keeps his eyes on his old team including the man running the point for the Knicks and knows why they are playing better.

"When smarter players come to the team, a lot of times, that's what happens," stressed Monroe. "You don't have to be the best player if you understand the game. Not to say that kid [Jalen] Brunson is not a great player, but at the same time, he's the guy who understands the game.

"I was saying to myself, I've been seeing him during his Villanova days, I saw him in Dallas, and I think I saw his smile one time."

The head coach has also caught Monroe's attention, even if he has what seems to be 15 assistant coaches. In Monroe's Knicks days, Coach Red Holzman had no assistants.

"Fifteen coaches?" Monroe laughed. "You've got to find a seat!"

"When you look at [Tom] Thibodeaux, I don't see him listening to anybody on the team. He might converse with them for a minute or so, but he's got his idea how the game is supposed to be and played.

"If you're the coach, whatever happens out there on the floor, it rests on you. The game is still the head coach."

And while there are many showmen in the NBA, no one reminds Earl of Earl. He had his number 15 and 10 retired by the Knicks and the Wizards, respectively.

"I can't say that because these guys jump higher," he admitted. "I do know that whatever the case may be, it's a combination of all the things I had done."

Even if you didn't dunk?

“I found out you don’t have to dunk to make two points,” pointed out Monroe, adding, “[Former NBA player and Milwaukee Bucks head coach] Larry Costello ended his career trying to stop me from dunking. So, that’s all I can say.”

Spoken like a true showman.

<https://www.nydailynews.com/sports/basketball/knicks/ny-earl-monroe-school-20230401-cindzmbnrffpcj5kpybffmsda-story.html>