

'The lure of the streets was very strong for me'

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glued to the bed he shared with five brothers.

"Suddenly in that bed, I would feel my kidneys bursting. That's when I started to wet the bed."

To avoid his mother's censure, Jones would keep his pyjama pants on in the morning and slip another pair of pants over them.

The stench of urine followed him to school, where he was hounded by tormenting children.

"I didn't care. My fear of the dark was so bad. That man was out there wanting to take me away."

He built a fortress in his mind—a place where he wasn't "corn" or "buckwheat" or "stupid."

He was the Lone Ranger or Tarzan or Superman.

"I closed these kids out. I closed everything out."

Including school. His education dripped to a halt in Grade 2, although teachers kept him in remedial class until the fourth grade.

"They called it the ding-dong class back then. I did what they expected. I acted like a ding-dong."

It didn't take long for teachers to pronounce him unteachable. Jones had a severe learning disability, they said. At 14, in the early 1960s, his father found him a job cleaning coal ovens for \$7 a week.

That lasted a month. And Jones found other things to do with his time.

"The lure of the streets was very strong for me. The pimps and the gamblers, they had a pocketful of money. They drove nice cars."

"The hard-working black people had nothing."

Eventually his exasperated parents sent Jones to Detroit to live with his Aunt Iba.

There, the quote of the streets drew him closer. He started as a numbers runner for a bookie and loan shark named Bumps.

"They called him Bumps because he had bumps," Jones recalls with a grin. "Bumps was so ugly, he had to sneak up on a glass of water."

But Bumps paid handsomely.

Detroit was a city of drive-by shootings and walk-by slashings. There was a gang for every project and sometimes two: The Motor City Shakers, The Twelfth Street Gang, The Starlight Stompers, The Stiletos.

Jones started his own: The Molesters. They wore black raincoats and gangster hats.

Armed with guns, straight razors and a bag full of blazing cayenne pepper, Jones no longer feared the pale man in black. Death became



SURVIVOR: A Grade 2 education didn't hold Spider Jones back from pursuing his dream of being a radio broadcaster. The Seneca College grad enrolled at the school at age 30.

"I get home and I tell my parents I lost. Man that's for me."

"My mother and father said, 'Boy, you better get your butt to work and quit talking nonsense.' In those times, blacks didn't do that kind of stuff."

"The dream sort of didn't die, but it smoldered," he says. "I went to bed listening to him every night on a little radio."

But he always woke up in Detroit. The loan sharks and hoods liked Jones. He could fight.

Today, when he clenches a fist, it's not the heavy mallet you expect of a former boxer, but a delicate knist.

"I have small hands," he muses. "I wasn't a knockout puncher, but I could hit."

His ability would win him three Golden Glove championships, the

"They're always looking at you with a gunned eye."

One sweltering summer day in 1967, officers cracked down on an illegal gambling club.

A mob sprung up and evaded with police, like angry sparks from all directions converging on a gas can. Detroit was burning.

"It happened so fast. It spread like wildfire," he remembers. "The flames were just belching. You're talking four square blocks of city on fire."

For seven days, Jones stood in the eye of the bloodstorm, unable to leave because gas stations were locked up and the border was closed.

He remembers tanks, armoured cars, explosives, bullets.

He remembers women with cutlery in their hair, pushing shopping carts—doing their shopping. When it ended, Detroit had

"I wanted to please her. She said, 'You know what, you can't be acting crazy. We could never make it like that. I want you to straighten out.'"

With the equivalent of a Grade 2 education, Jones knew it wouldn't be easy.

"I had nothing to offer the world," he says. "I had no esteem at all. I had no confidence."

But with Alan Freed still purring in his ear, the 30-year-old visited Seneca College and shared his dreams of becoming a broadcaster with a counsellor.

"Now, this was my last chance."

Doug Smith was preparing to give the first lesson in a high school upgrade course in the fall of 1979 when a towering 6-foot-2 man stepped inside—197 pounds of solid oak.

He had been in the ring with Ali and Charvalo. He had stood at the centre of a gangland inferno, as the unflinching Minister of War.

He couldn't sit still in the classroom.

"I was more frightened than I ever was in my life. Now I had to commit to something. I was frightened because if I blew it now, it was over."

He sat for a few uncertain moments amid a sea of 20- and 21-year-olds.

Then he stood and walked out.

Smith followed him into the hallway.

"It was almost like he sensed it—or fate sent him after me."

"I don't think I can handle this," Jones told him.

"You want to quit on yourself again?" Smith asked.

"No sir, I don't," Jones said, tears welling in his eyes.

Smith put his arm around Jones

and said, "I'll help you."

Within a few months, Jones had conquered the academic scene as readily as he did the ring.

He worked at the campus radio station and the newspaper. He ate with the teachers in the staff room.

"I owned the damn place for three years," he says. "They loved me and I loved them."

He alternated jobs as a doorman and a carpet cleaner, returning home as late as 2 a.m. to do his homework, back in class by 7:30 the next morning.

The pattern lasted five days a week for 12 straight months.

"My wife understood me. Strong support from school. Strong support from home. It means a lot."

He had three children at the time. Now he has four.

"She believed in me. I've never had a person believe in me like my wife Jackie. She's a source of inspiration all the time."

After charging through school, he was awarded a high school equivalency diploma.

It was time to shift to the second phase of his dream plan, but more than 700 people had similar ambitions. They all applied for the 70 available spots in Seneca's broadcast journalism course.

Michael Monty, who co-ordinated the program, didn't know what to make of Jones' application.

"Spider was a bit older than the others," he says. "At the same time, when you look at his background, it was sort of 'What the heck does a guy like that want to do coming into a broadcast course? He's a professional boxer, for Pete's sake.'"

When Jones learned that Monty was in charge of the program, he cornered him.

"I hassled him at every opportunity," Jones recalls. "I used to chase him down the halls and tell him, 'Mr. Monty, my future is in your hands.'"

"I would peek into the staff room where they ate and I'd holler, 'Mr. Monty, my future is in your hands.'"

"What stood out about Spider's application was Spider himself," Monty says. "I had never ever met a guy who was just so determined to do something."

"Finally, there were times with Spider when you had to say, 'All right already, I give up.'"

Days later, a letter of acceptance arrived in the mail.

"It was like hitting the lottery for me. It completely changed my life," Jones says.

Scholarships rolled in and Jones vaulted through the program. He worked at several radio stations, wedding his passion for sports with natural broadcast charm.

At Toronto's FAN 590, "The Spider's Web" became a national obsession in overnight radio, featuring interviews with Muhammad Ali, Willie Mays and Wayne Gretzky. When the show went to Talk 640, it became Canada's most popular mid-prime-time radio show. He's currently on CFRE.

And now, at 51, Spider Jones is returning to school. But this time it's to be honoured as part of a special reception for this year's Premier's Award winners.

Every year, Ontario colleges nominate graduates for one of six Premier's Awards. Jones will receive the award in the category of applied arts during tomorrow's ceremony in London, Ont.

The awards, created in 1992, honour the best of Ontario's college graduates, emphasizing their contributions to society. In addition to a bronze medal, winners receive \$5,000, which streams back into colleges as a bursary.

"I'm living my dream now," says a jubilant Jones. "I did it now."

He's become the Alan Freed of sports radio—a knockout for the man who never threw knockout punches. He used "an accumulation of punches" to bring dreams to life—and now, life to dreams.

Not content to have lifted himself from the cauldron of poverty, racism and violence, he extends a scarred hand to others through radio work, charity efforts and especially the Jones story, which he shares with thousands of people suffering from "the number one predator of our children today": low self-esteem.

"It steals your confidence away. It steals your joy. It steals your aspirations. It fills you with self-hatred. It fills you with doubt."

During his visits to schools and prisons, Jones' list only pounds home a point.

"Now, it means I'm fighting—fighting for opportunities for young people."

He's also managed to beat back a long-time adversary: the man in black.

"I have no fear of the dark at all any more."

'I didn't have enough sense in me to try to get out. I didn't have enough vision. I didn't have enough guidance. There are many kids like that today. They can't find their way out.'

By Chuck Spizer Jones, as his life in Detroit

him. He taught his gang how to fight. He showed them how to turn a punch into an elbow and follow it with a head butt. They called him the Minister of War.

"Instead of throwing a right hand, I'd sort of slip underneath and work the elbow to the rib cage," he says, keeping to his feet to demonstrate.

"I even sent away for stuff out of a commando book. I still have them. They're all yellow now."

Jones flashes a pale white scar on the meaty nub below his thumb. That's where he warded off a slashing razor. The long scar on his back is where he didn't.

"I fought a lot when I was young," and death never gave up on him.

His cousin Leroy sang in the church choir. He dreamed of becoming an evangelist.

"One night, he went out to get something for a girl he was with. Never came home."

Police found his body on Detroit's 12th St.

"You had to be pretty cold to attack that kid. He wasn't a fighter. He didn't know how to fight."

He pauses. "It still hurts me today when I think about it. I wonder what it would be like with him around."

"I loved me and I loved him."

Less than two months later, another cousin was stabbed 30 times on his way home from a roller rink. He survived, but the pale man in black was still rapping at Jones' door.

Two members of his gang went to the northern part of the city on a drug errand. Their bodies were found in the back of a car, beaten, shot and burned.

Devil's gonna get you.

There was another voice in his life: the smooth, syrupy sound of Alan Freed.

Chuck "Spider" Jones was still a boy, sweeping floors at the Windsor Arena, when one of the top disk jockeys of his day swept into the arena. Freed would introduce classic Motown acts like Smokey Robinson and The Temptations.

friendship of Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, and an entry in the Canadian Boxing Hall of Fame.

Jones was only knocked out once.

"It was less painful than being beat up around the body. You don't even know it when you're knocked out. You come to, maybe you're a little dizzy, you've got a little headache. You go through a brutal session with a body puncher, your body hurts. I mean a just hurts."

A cracked nose and a jaw that was broken in four places hurt at the pugilist past, but it's barely discernible on his bright, handsome face.

Only brittle hands remember the pain. "Sometimes my hands hurt like a toothache."

A deep s-lit in his chin hints of a childhood fantasy: Superman.

But the man of steel never lived in the Murder City.

"I didn't have enough sense in me to try to get out. I didn't have enough vision. I didn't have enough guidance. There are many kids like that today. They can't find their way out. They need somebody to reach in and pull them out and say, 'Come on.'"

"I stayed in it and got deeper into it. It was the only thing I knew."

When Jones finally left, it's because he was burned out of town.

In 1967, Detroit had 780 murders. It was the year the city snapped.

"You can live off hope," Jones says. "But black kids knew they weren't going anywhere back then. They weren't opening doors for them. There were no people in the boardrooms, there were no people on television."

And there was always the shadow of 1400 Deschubien St.

Police headquarters.

The most feared address in America at that time, bar none," Jones says. "A brother went in there. He might as well have been going into a Ku Klux Klan meeting."

Most police officers were uneducated and white, most of Detroit was residential and black.

lost its soul.

"The spirit of Detroit was Motown," Jones says. "When Detroit burnt in 1967, Motown moved to Los Angeles. And Detroit was never the same."

"After that, I just didn't want any more. Something hit me. I took my gun and I threw it in the Detroit River."

He hitchhiked to Toronto that day. Trouble came along for the ride. Fights, robbery attempts and violence spelled prison evils and a string of dead-end jobs.

Then he found Jackie, the woman who would become his wife of 27 years.



PEACE AT LAST: Spider Jones, looking out at the marina near his Ajax home, has come a long way since his youth in Windsor and Detroit, where violent crime made life a daily battle.