

Bx. boxing great gets off ropes!

Ex-champ Barkley in new home

BY DANIEL BEEKMAN
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FORMER MIDDLEWEIGHT champion Iran "The Blade" Barkley is off the mat and no longer homeless.

Five months after landing in a shelter, the legendary South Bronx boxer finally has a place to call his own — a shiny, renovated studio apartment.

"Walking in here was the greatest feeling in the world," Barkley said yesterday, showing off a new gas stove and donated microwave. "Knowing nobody can tell me to get out."

Barkley spent months sleeping on the subway last fall after a relative kicked him out of the housing project apartment they shared.

"I don't like to call it 'homeless,'" he said. "I like to call it 'down on my luck.'"

Barkley learned to bob and weave at St. Mary's Gym in Mott Haven. Boxing helped the gentle giant escape the wild streets.

The 6-foot-1 brawler got his big shot in Las Vegas two decades ago when he floored Tommy "Hitman" Hearns and snagged a WBC championship belt.

"He cut me on my eyes and busted my lip," recalled Barkley, now heavyset with a shaved head. "I knew I had to go street and go get him, and then BOOM!"

Barkley squandered millions in winnings on property, luxury cars and trips.

"I was hanging out with Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall," said Barkley. "I had to keep up."

Then Barkley grew old. He put on weight. He had trouble getting fights. So he left Vegas and flew back to the Bronx, where needy pals sucked him dry.

"When you're making the

most money around, everybody seems to find you," he said.

For years, a jobless Barkley struggled to make ends meet, volunteering at a private school and local gyms.

Barkley's luck changed last December, when friends steered him to a shelter run by BronxWorks, a local nonprofit.

"Anybody can become homeless," said BronxWorks executive director Carolyn McLaughlin. "Things happen — financial issues, health issues, family. Iran is just one of hundreds of people we've been able to move off the street."

BronxWorks helped him get disability for brain damage from boxing and found a landlord eager to give him cheap rent.

"Iran has been through some hard times, but he's a fighter at heart," said his buddy Joe DeGuardia, a boxing promoter. "He just keeps on coming."

Barkley beamed as he strode through the entrance to his Morrisania building, engraved with the words, "With God's love, all things are possible."



Ex-boxing champ Iran Barkley has reason to smile as he moves into Bronx apartment. Barkley, homeless for five months, shows off poster of mom and framed photo of his past glory. Photos by Aaron Showalter



Feds: Semi didn't hit tragic bus

FEDERAL INVESTIGATORS said yesterday they found no evidence a casino tour bus was struck by a tractor-trailer before it crashed in the Bronx killing 15 people.

The National Transportation Safety Board also said the bus, which was returning to Chinatown from the Mohegan Sun casino in Connecticut, was barreling down the highway at 78 mph. The speed limit on that stretch of Interstate 95 is 55 mph.

The report says the World Wide Travel bus, carrying 32 passengers, veered to the right, crossed the shoulder, hit a barrier and traveled 480 feet as it fell over. Then it slid into a vertical sign support that cut through the bus.

The driver, Ophadell Williams, told police he was forced to swerve when a tractor-trailer clipped the bus in the early morning of March 12.

Williams has not been charged and his lawyer, Sean Rooney, maintained yesterday that a tractor-trailer was involved.

"Whether there was incidental contact or not is really irrelevant," he said.

Some surviving passengers who are suing Williams allege he was asleep, but Rooney said Williams was well-rested and alert.

He said police tested Williams' breath and blood for alcohol, and the tests were negative. Police have not confirmed that.

News Wire Services

Jeweler to stars admits to fraud

A FAMED Manhattan jeweler who has sold jewels to the Hollywood elite pleaded guilty to bankruptcy fraud yesterday and now faces up to 10 years in prison.

Ralph Esmerian, 71, admitted to lying and double-dealing in order to hide assets and defraud creditors.

"I intended to conceal money from the sale [of jewelry] from creditors," Esmerian said in Manhattan Federal Court.

The former head of jewelry store Fred Leighton admitted to hiding or stealing more than \$20 million in a fraud scheme.

The plot centered on a \$10 million butterfly brooch that Esmerian admitted selling and not telling creditors about.

He also sold jewelry that was supposed to be collateral on loans without telling the lenders.

Esmerian, who faces 97 to 120 months in prison under his plea deal, remains free on a \$3.5 million bond. He will be sentenced in July.

Scott Shifrel