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Slam dunk with students

Ex-NBAer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar visits Tustin school for Black History Month.

By **FERMIN LEAL** and **JORGE BARRIENTOS**

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TUSTIN – Before Monday, many students at Tustin Ranch Elementary only knew Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as that 7-foot-2-inch center who sky hooked, slammed and swatted basketballs along the way to six NBA championships.

But after meeting the hall-of-famer, students got to know a different Abdul-Jabbar – the successful author and passionate advocate for appreciation of history and contributions of blacks to society.

Abdul-Jabbar spoke to about 60 students at Tustin Ranch Elementary School Monday morning as part of the school's celebration of Black History Month.

The former Los Angeles Laker was a guest of Orange Coast College professor Raymond Obstfeld, a parent at the elementary school and co-author of Abdul-Jabbar's new book, "On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance."

"The history of our country with regards to race hasn't always been the best," Abdul-Jabbar told the students. "People of color have done a lot to make this country a great place."

Abdul-Jabbar talked to the students about black Revolutionary War heroes such as Peter Salem, a former slave who helped Americans win the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775.

"I would encourage all of you to find out something about black history so you can learn about the contributions of people like (Salem)," Abdul-Jabbar told students. "And I hope you have fun doing that."

The thrilled students also asked Abdul-Jabbar questions about his basketball career.

They wanted to know everything from "What's the most points you ever scored in a game?" to "Were you ever jealous of other players on the team?"

The answers were 61 points in one game, and "I only got jealous when I started losing my hair and none of the other players did."

Fourth-grader Michael Sakhel said he started jumping and screaming when he learned Abdul-Jabbar would be visiting his campus.



VISITING AT SCHOOL: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar says he would have become a history teacher if he had never played basketball.

ANDY TEMPLETON, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

Born: April 16, 1947, in New York

Height: 7 foot, 2 inches

Achievement: One of 50 Greatest Players in NBA History (1996)

Retired: 1989

Hall of Fame: May 15, 1995

College: UCLA, all-time leading scorer, three national championships, led them to an 88-2 record

NBA championships: 6

Played for: Milwaukee Bucks 1969-75 and Los Angeles Lakers from 1975-89

MVPs: 6 (1971, 1972, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1980)

Holds NBA career record for: points (38,387), minutes played (57,446), field goals made (15,837), field goals attempted (28,307), All-Star selections (19), playoff games played (237)

Sources: NBA and Hoop Hall Web sites

"I never miss a Lakers game on television. This was so exciting," Sakhel said.

Missy Bala, a fifth-grade teacher, was ready to accept Abdul-Jabbar into the teaching field after he told the students he would have been a history teacher if he had never played basketball.

"We have openings," she shouted.

Bala's students chose prominent blacks to study in her class. She said she was thrilled when she heard Abdul-Jabbar was going to be speaking to her students.

"He is so involved with promoting African-American education and history," she said.

Abdul-Jabbar says he speaks at schools whenever he gets a chance to talk about contributions of lesser-known blacks in making America great.

"If it doesn't have anything to do with slavery or civil rights, they don't know too much about it," Abdul-Jabbar said. "It goes slavery, civil rights and Michael Jordan. I'm trying to affect that."



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A MAN TO LOOK UP TO: Max Obstfeld, whose father co-wrote a book with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, welcomes the former NBA star to Tustin Ranch Elementary school on Monday.
ANDY TEMPLETON, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER