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Clifford Ray's long arms: How a Warrior saved a dolphin



In 1978, Golden State Warriors' center Clifford Ray saved a dolphin by reaching into its stomach and pulling out a bolt it had swallowed. (Associated Press file)

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Former NBA champion Clifford Ray, Jr. will be in front of Old Fisherman's Grotto on Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey, owned by his "best friend" Chris Shake, to greet the

community and sign copies of his children's book, "Big Clifford Ray Saves the Day" on April 27.

Most people will probably recognize the former professional basketball player and coach as an NBA champion, an effective defender and rebounder, who played for the Chicago Bulls from 1971-74, and for the Golden State Warriors from 1974-81.

Yet the 6-foot, 9-inch tall athlete carries additional claims to fame. While attending Sims Union High School in his native South Carolina, the accomplished musician, specializing in woodwind instruments, was asked to become drum major of the marching band, for which he became nationally renowned.

"I actually became quite famous as the drum major," said Ray, 75. "And I was part of a really good choir. We were invited to sing at the Washington National Cathedral in DC, where we sang in front of the Kennedys, whom I met."



Clifford Ray in 2018. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

Ray's musical proclivities landed him a music scholarship to Grambling State University, and an invitation to become drum major for their world-famous GSU Tiger Marching Band. He chose, instead, to attend Oklahoma State University, from which he commenced in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, the same year he launched his basketball career with the Bulls.

Yet, in 1978, Ray was quite unexpectedly involved in a rescue mission, which became yet another claim to fame, and since has been elevated to legendary status.



“I was in the San Francisco Bay Area, having recovered from an injured calf muscle, and had just gotten to the airport to fly out to Washington DC,” he said, “where the Warriors were going to play. A black limo pulled up, and I was told to get in. Airport officials said they’d hold my flight, so I got in.”

Ray was taken to Marine World/Africa USA in Redwood City, where “Spock,” a bottlenose dolphin was in serious distress, after swallowing a bolt with a sharp screw, which presumably had fallen off the maintenance crew’s vacuum and into his tank. The park veterinarian, unwilling to perform a risky operation, and having failed, after using forceps, to retrieve the bolt from the dolphin’s stomach, lamented that he didn’t have long-enough arms to help retrieve the bolt.

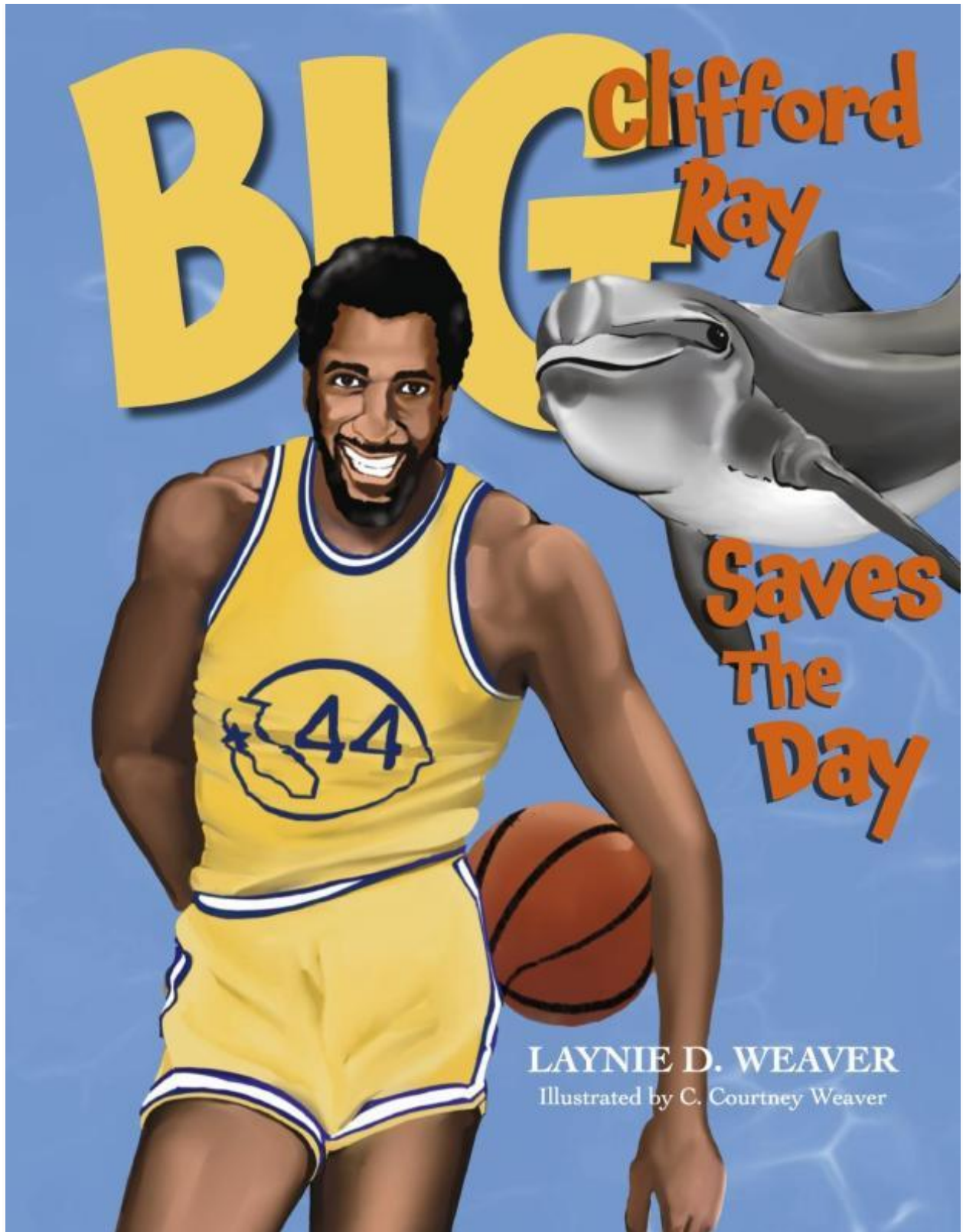
“Marine World President Mike Demetrios, a big basketball fan, thought I, with a more-than seven-foot wing span — each arm measures 3 feet, 9 inches — could do the trick,” Ray said. “They cut my nails, put me in scrubs, and said I’d probably have to reach in up to my neck. They also said (the dolphin) wouldn’t bite.”

Dolphins are smart, intuitive animals, says Ray. This one, likely knowing he was in trouble and needed help, remained completely calm.

“I love dolphins,” said Ray. “The first time I went to a movie, they were playing ‘Flipper.’ (1963). I thought dolphins were so cool. And now here I was, all those years later,

about to reach my whole arm down into a dolphin's stomach, to save his life. I was so excited. And I actually was successful on my first try. As soon as I brought out that screw, the news went all over the world. I was featured in National Geographic."

Ray was transported back to the airport where, indeed, they had held his plane. As he settled into first class, his seatmate said, "So you're the one who kept us waiting." Once Elizabeth Taylor heard Ray's dolphin story, the animal lover decided it was worth the wait.



Clifford Ray's brief biography presented in rhyming verse, begins with a boy learning to fish and concludes with Ray's daring dolphin rescue. (Contributed)

Some 45 years after the Marine World event, Ray and his writing partner, Laynie D. Weaver, released “Big Clifford Ray Saves the Day,” a colorful children’s book, illustrated by Weaver’s sister, artist C. Courtney Weaver. The 52-page book, a brief biography presented in rhyming verse, begins with a boy, learning to fish, imagining far-off oceans, and falling in love with “Flipper.” It concludes with Ray’s daring dolphin rescue.

“Interested in writing his biography, Clifford reached out to me through mutual friends,” said Weaver, author of “A Most Improbable Millionaire” (2021). “At the end of our interview, he said he could tell he liked my writing by the way I spoke and thought we should write a book together. He’s so interesting; he deserves a full biography. But we decided to start with a children’s book.”

Although Weaver had not yet met Ray in person and had never written a children’s book, she flew across the country to spend a long weekend interviewing him for this book.

“Clifford picked me up at the airport, gave me a room in his house, and we interviewed for four days,” she said. “He’s a great cook; we did most of our interviews over our meals. And then we’d go to the gym.”

Laynie Weaver’s one caveat in writing the children’s book was that it must rhyme. While she realized this would make the writing more challenging, she wanted the book to be read out loud, to be heard through the rhythm of rhyme. And then she engaged her sister, artist C. Courtney Weaver, to create colorful, lifelike illustrations.

“Kids love this book,” said Ray. “They find things they can relate to. I’m now doing a book drive, trying to motivate corporations to donate books, so we can get them into the hands of every elementary and middle school student.”

Ray, who has survived two bouts of cancer, chose the Duke Cancer Institute in North Carolina as the recipient of a portion of book sales.

If you go

What: Meet & Greet and Book Signing event with NBA Champion Clifford Ray, Jr.

Where: In front of Old Fisherman’s Grotto on Fisherman’s Wharf in Monterey

When: Saturday, April 27, from 1 to 5 p.m.