It was two days away from the Teddy Atlas Foundation dinner, the annual gala which raises funds for people in New York who have fallen through the cracks.

Because we live in a society and a system which reveres profit-making, and quarter after quarter growth, and Wall Street wizardry which looks an awful lot like wholesale larceny when you look closely, with a magnifying glass and more than a rudimentary understanding of the-deliberately-so-intricate-to-encourage-exploitation complexities of modern day instruments of moneymaking, and has lost sight of the plight of the have nots, Teddy Atlas was hustling more than usual trying to fill the room, the Hilton Garden Inn in Staten Island, New York, his home base.

Youve all noticed, the economy, unless you are a Wall Street wizard, or maybe run a payday loan(sharking) business, basically sucks. Unemployment is over 9%, if you believe the government stats, or something closer to 20% if you believe a less biased assessor. Those with jobs, Regular Joes who dont rely on dividends, and capital gains, if they are lucky enough to work a full slate, and havent been cut back in the name of productivity, worry that they wont keep that job. Every dollar they make goes to keeping the roof over their head, food on the table, and anything extra probably gets socked away for the kids education fund, or a rainy day fund, to be used to stave off bankruptcy stemming from catastrophic illness.. Many of us, I dare say most us, would like to do more in the realm of charitable giving. But when were scraping by ourselves, many of us cant be as generous for those truly in need as wed like.

Atlas has noticed. I was just on the phone with him yesterday, getting an update on the likely attendance number at the Teddy Dinner, which this year will feature honoree Dick Ebersol, the current chairman of NBC Universal Sports and Olympics, as well as special guests Twyla Tharp, the dancer/choreographer; ex flamethrowing reliever Goose Gossage; and Phil Simms, the ex Giants QB who was MVP of Super Bowl XXI. He gave me an update on the prospects for a packed house at the dinner on Thursday, and a primer on why the Foundation matters, and why it works.

Its going good, said the ESPN boxing analyst, who started the Foundation in honor of his father, Theodore, who is beloved on Staten Island for doing house calls, and for taking a a bag of apples, or a chicken dinner, in payment for his services. from a family down on its luck. Its been tough economic times the last couple of years, but it seems like the people whove supported us before, even in difficult times find a way to be with us at the dinner, support the Foundation. I think well sell out, but this is the first year were a couple days away and were not sold out.

The room fits 800, but shhh, dont tell the fire marshal, its a good cause, as many as 1,000 or so can fit. So, even if the number of attendees drops slightly this year, guess what? The number of calls from people at the end of their rope, with nowhere else to turn, will likely only increase.

When insurance companies tell Mrs Jones that yes, well pay for your kids operation to remove that tumor, but no, we wont pay for the medication which can tally $1,200 bucks a month to keep the cancer at bay, the Atlas Foundation writes a check.

When that organization that is set up to battle muscular dystrophy tells Mr Smith that the funds they take in go mostly to research, so one day a Timmy Smith wont have to fight a losing battle with his muscles that are wasting to nothing...and Mr Smith does some research, and learns that 86% of monies taken in go to administrative costs, and he gets pissed off, but contains his fury, and hunts for an angel, and reaches out to the Atlas Foundation, the Foundation sets him up with a specialized wheelchair.

Were a stopgap organization, Atlas explains. We step in when people need help that moment.

Many of us are fortunate enough, and willfully blind ourselves to the sad truth that in this land of plenty, the richest nation in the world, where were so engulfed in a culture of greed that the billionaire head of the private equity firm the Blackstone Group says, Its a war. Its like when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 when it became clear that President Obama might up the taxes on the revenue (from 15 to perhaps 35%) taken in when PE firms buy and then sell companies, that kids go hungry every day in the US. The Foundation feeds well over 300 families a week, people who werent born fortunate, or on a fast track to fancy schools. Dont let those folks who want to further strip away the safety nets that exist for the have nots try to convince you that most of those who get a handup are just sponges, looking for freebies while they laugh at the hard working saps who pay into the system.

Now, Atlas is probably a better strategist than I. I have no clue what way if any he leans politically. He doesnt rail against the politicians, the cynical, soulless opportunists who see this recession as an opportunity to remove entitlements, to strip away Social Security, and health care for the less wealthy. My railing here, thats all me, my way of coping, and yes, attempting to pursuade some fencesitters who are open to logic, facts, and the willingness to nurture their conscience and seeds of selflessness, instead of..whatever it is Fox News/the GOP is peddling. Instead, Atlas out there, heading to at-risk schools, trying to change the lives of some of these dead end kids whose resume will read Rikers Island 2014-2034 if they continue on the path to self destruction.

I know some of you reading this want me to shut up, stop moralizing. Maybe youre inclined to tell these kids to suck it up, find better role models, pull yourselves up by your bootstraps. Easy for you to say, from your throne of relative privilege.

Teddy, on many days when he isnt working on Friday Night Fights, or training his heavyweight contender, Alexander Povetkin, sees kids like Antoine, who doesnt have any boots to pull up, and wouldnt know how to lace em up if he got a pair, because nobody was inclined to mentor the kid. Antoines dad was a drug dealer, and was shot and killed on the streets. His mom is a hooker, his stepdad is also a drug dealer. And Teddy gets in their face, something like he does when he sees a fighter who isnt living up to his potential blowing it.

What do you care about, Antoine? Atlas says to the kid during a school visit. I dont think you

care about anyone, from what I hear from the teachers here.

I care about someone, the kid says.

No you dont, says Atlas, challenging the his assumptions, putting a little fear of rigorous self analysis into him.

How do you know? I care about my sister.

Well, you dont care about yourself, I know that. Because if you continue like youre going, you better stop caring about your sister. Because youre heading to Rikers. So if you do care, stop caring. because there, theyll use that against you, to destroy you.

The teachers tell me you dont do any work, he continues. You think maybe youre too smart for that. But at Rikers, you are going to be doing work. Overtime. Youre going to be working hard to keep people out of your ass. Work to not get raped. To keep those sneakers on your feet. Man, I wouldnt take that job. And youre not going to be paid, Atlas says. No, wait, I take that back. Youll get ten cents an hour.

He didnt know what to say, Atlas said to me Tuesday.

Adults in Antoines life are so busy trying to eke out an existence, as flawed and sick and sad as it may be. They dont have extra love, or attention, to give to the kid, the kid who seems incorrigible, a waste of space and time.

But it isnt all scared straight stuff. Atlas holds out hope, and a carrot. Lots of these kids do have role models. They like the NBAers, LeBron, Kobe. So Atlas tells them, If you toe the line for two months, show up to school, pull up your grades some, treat the teachers with some respect, Ill take you to the Garden, watch the Knicks against the Heat.

With Antoine, Atlas heard the kid liked football. So he said if Antoine pulled himself together for two months, hed take him to the football camp run by the Browns coach, Eric Mangini, an Atlas pal.

He didnt really deserve it, but he was a special case, Atlas says.

So Antoine, 13, piled on a bus with 55 15-16 year olds, and went to the camp this past summer. Atlas asked tight end Dustin Keller to give Antoine some extra attention. So in a seven on seven touch game, Antoine went out for a pass. He caught a spiral, and ducked, and dodged, and scampered into the end zone. And he collected some high fives, and he flashed an every-tooth-showing grin. And it was one of the only times hes felt good about himself, the analyst/trainer said. He never had anyone applaud him, not ever, not even for a birthday. The bottom line, hes doing better now.

Instead of dismissing kids like Antoine as one of a seedy lot of undesirables, as so many stone-hearted types tend to do, if they even contemplate them at all, Atlas takes his sometimes

stern, sometimes intimidating manner, into the schools regularly, and gives the kids a dose of tough talk.

Not long ago, Atlas went a school, and was going to give the kids, at risk youth, with not enough textbooks, in a low income neighborhood, a lecture. In a classroom, his jaw dropped as he saw the youth, 14, 15, rampaging. They looked like this wasnt a special occasion of misbehavior, either. They were running around, yapping.

The teachers were a bit embarrassed. One tried to stop an unruly child.

Get your effin hands off me! he barked.

Atlas went from surprised, to steamed, to boiling over.

Im angry, he said to a group of three teachers. You guys should be ashamed of yourselves, for letting this happen. This is your classroom!

I, sir, am the principal! one of the adults answered, nostrils flared to the max.

Atlas then turned his attention to the kids.

Shut the eff up!

They stiffened, went dead silent.

You guys are a bunch of punks, he said. Youre in your groups, every one of you in a group. If you were alone, youd never behave this way.

The teachers asked him how he shut them up, made them listen.

The kids knew it was the truth, he told me. Nobody was alone. Everyone had a posse.

He told them what awaited them at Rikers, where most are headed for, if not a lengthy stay, then at least a stint, if they keep it up.

He told them they were cowards, for not trying to excel at square stuff, that they were taking the easy way, because if they didnt try, they could blame it on not trying, instead of trying, and falling short. Nobody will say youre stupid, Atlas told the kids. Theyll say you dont care.

They never heard any stuff like that, Atlas said. Most knew he was involved in boxing, had trained Mike Tyson. He told them that to be a champion, theyd have to face unpleasant truths.

Youve got to be able to face things, not spend youre whole day running. Thats what a champion does.

He continued. He asked them to raise their hands if theyd like one day to excel, and get a belt,

a fancy car, two houses. Hands shot up, stayed up.

Whod like to do twenty years in jail? he asked.

Not a hand went up.

Put your hand up, Atlas said, targeting one kid who came off like a leader. Twenty years. Thats what youre aspiring to, embracing.

Two months later, Atlas got a call back from one of the teachers. Six of the kids in that class were doing significantly better. They responded like Michael Moorer did against Holyfield, in 1994.

When I chatted with Atlas, we delved into the Foundation stuff for a half hour, then I asked him to weigh in on Pacquiao-Margarito, and the De La Hoya comeback. I told him that Id like to pull a Trojan Horse deal, lead with the boxing stuff, then sneak in the Foundation stuff.

But the hell with that.

The Foundation stuff is a whole heck of a lot more important than who Manny will fight next. Heck, Manny even knows that.

We all, and I include myself in the mix, divert ourselves from the harsh realities of who we are as a society. I see it as a crucial crossroads in the US, where we could undo much of the good we did in terms of the safety nets for the common man, if we let the shrink the deficit crowd convince us that needs to happen at the expense of the programs which make this land a more equitable, gentler place than many every man for himself, every Rand acolyte, would like. They have their cushion, their stream of dividends. You dont? Tough tamales. They have their health insurance. You dont? Sorry, Jack, thats the breaks.

If there is anyone else in the fight game who puts out more time, energy, effort, and does more philanthropic good than Teddy Atlas, please submit that name to me, and Ill toot their horn loud and proud. Hey, maybe you dont care for that accent, or maybe you lost a few bucks backing Margarito after Teddy touted him on Friday Night Fights, etc etc. Whatever. The guy is making a difference in the lives of people who deserve it, because fate has kicked them in the teeth, and when they went down to pick up the chiclets, booted them in the gut like a field goal kicker. So, I know theres a couple of you high rollers out there in TSS Universe who can write a check thatll do some good. Heres the info on the Foundation. www.dratlasfoundation.com/ Please make it happen.

Later today, well delve into why Teddy knew he backed the wrong horse in the first round of the Pacquiao-Margarito fight, what might be inspiring De La Hoya to try a comeback and why hed rather see Yuriorkis Gamboa fight Pacman next, over Shane Mosley. Its good stuff, provocative stuff.

But really, its diversion. The real deal, the meaningful stuff, takes place on Thursday night at

the Foundation dinner, and the other 364 days a year when the Foundation is making the world a little bit more hospitable, a bit brighter, to people less fortunate than you and me.