

Courting success

Locals lead program for tennis & education

by Michael Catarevas
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In 1995, when 13-year-old Michael Crafter was living in the hardscrabble Roodner Court public housing complex in Norwalk, it wasn't easy to get to the four tennis courts that were right across the street.

"He would come to play with his tennis racquet hidden under his shirt," explains Arthur Goldblatt, the founder of the first Grassroots tennis program in Fairfield County,

and who has helped launch the four-year-old Connecticut Alliance for Tennis & Education (CATE). "He had an innate love for the game, but tennis wasn't a popular sport with kids back then, and he had to be careful."

Crafter, now 32 and working for the Norwalk Housing Authority, agrees those days were a little dicey. "Kids would pick on you if they saw you with tennis stuff. The courts were kind of set up

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Kids in the Norwalk Grassroots tennis program show their enthusiasm. The Connecticut Alliance for Tennis & Education (CATE), spearheaded by several New Canaan residents, has added structure and fund-raising to several such organizations.

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behind some woods, so once I got there it was cool."

There are no such worries now, as tennis has hit the mainstream, and CATE has blossomed into an organization currently reaching over 4,000 children in Norwalk, Bridgeport, Danbury, New Haven and Stamford. The tennis programs provide a path to success above and beyond the obvious benefits of exercise and teamwork.

By engaging youth with tennis in their neighborhoods, CATE also provides funding for academic support, life skills coaching, nutritional education, field trips and college and career counseling.

"The individual programs in the five cities used to do their own thing," says Alex

Seaver, a New Canaan resident and founder of CATE. "Art (Goldblatt) came up with a 'mothership' concept to connect them. Now we're able to discuss the best practices and fund-raising methods to maximize benefits for all."

Seaver, the founder and managing partner of Stadium Capital Management, is joined by several others with connections to New Canaan who are impacting CATE.

Harlan Stone is president of the Alliance, Mary Stichter is executive director, and Amy Sheffield holds an executive position. All are town residents.

Anne Worcester, president of the New Haven Open tennis tournament, and a member of the CATE board, also lives in New Canaan, as does board member and USTA executive Bill Mountford.

"All of us are tennis players who love the game," says Seaver. "We're giving back

through tennis. I chair the organization, and we meet to discuss what the five city groups are doing, what they need and how we can make an impact."

Raising money to pay for coaches, equipment and more is of primary importance. Each of the five programs has its own fund-raising, while CATE's major event is an annual pro-am Tennis Tournament and Gala. Scheduled this year for Sept. 12-13 at Darien's Woodway Country Club, former tour pro James Blake, who attended Fairfield High School, is the featured speaker, following past luminaries Patrick McEnroe, Mats Wilander and legendary Stanford tennis coach Dick Gould.

As for the tournament, "It's a very competitive event, with sponsors and teams," notes Seaver. "A lot of teaching pros come to play, along with players who have been

on the pro circuit. There are two divisions, with \$2,000 to the winner and \$1,000 for runner-up."

All proceeds are funneled back to the kids in the five cities.

"The Alliance takes a collective approach, as all of us are dealing with the same subset of kids to make sure the support is used in the best way," says Carl Bailey, also on the CATE board, and a founder of the Danbury program. "The kids eat well, they're exercising, they're playing tennis and they're getting good grades. It's everything you'd want your own children to be and to have, and it's the goal of this program."

"Once they're exposed to the game, once they're interested, we then use tennis to plug them into a broader constellation of programming that involves tutoring, life skills mentoring and more," says Christian McNamara, execu-

tive director, New Haven Youth Tennis and Education.

Adds Osby McMillan, who works with the Bridgeport program, "At the end of the day, what we're trying to do is take our kids to the next level and try to get them prepared for college."

Crafter, who long ago had to hide his racquet, is a shining example of how an organization like CATE can make a difference.

"He was good in school, but had serious family issues," reveals Goldblatt, a retired lawyer. "He and his mom had to move out of their place. He graduated high school (playing four years on the tennis team) but had no money for college. I helped him with the paperwork and applications for financial aid, and he enrolled at Norwalk Community College. After two years there he went to Fairfield University, where he got a degree in sociology and psychology."

Now back in Norwalk, Crafter has a busy work schedule, but "I still try to help out when I'm able to make my way over there. When I first started it was strictly tennis. But as the years went by the program became something more. I benefitted not just from the game, but from the people I met, and the positive relationships I developed."

Goldblatt concurs. "Tennis players know how much tennis can do for you, by way of health, friends, self-confidence and having fun in life," he says. "We started this Alliance to sort of crystallize that goodwill."

And, he admits, there's no better feeling than seeing someone like Crafter, who went from an embattled youth from a broken home to a community leader as an adult.

"The tennis and education program transformed his life," said Goldblatt with a proud smile.