

Player to mentor to social entrepreneur

Ned Eames and Tenacity help the next generation develop the inner girl and boy.

By Warren Bolon
Sentinel staff

PRETZEL BAGS AND EMPTY JUICE CARTONS in the trash bag say, “Kids were here.” So do the box of books, writing pads, and pencils by the door. A few tutors, a college student volunteer, and a program director/favorite uncle-type by the name of Andy have lingered to straighten things up.

But the dozen kids have left the study hall strangely neat and clean. This was a fairly serious study hour. Oh, did I mention they play tennis here, too?

“Here” is the Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Center at Roxbury Community College in Boston. It is one of two sites for the indoor phase of Tenacity, an after-school tennis and academic program. Last year over 2,000 kids participated at 24 sites, covering nearly every Boston neighborhood.

According to Tenacity’s executive director, Ned Eames, the program is designed to develop the scholastic, physical, and spiritual lives of urban kids, as well as their character, by combining tennis instruction and competition with after-school academic support. And in this case, “after-school” does not equal afterthought. Kids must maintain a B average in their regular schoolwork to participate.

While our study-hall kids took their rotation on the tennis courts, I talked with Eames about his motivation for starting Tenacity, which he co-founded in 1999 with Boston-area tennis pro Bud Schultz. He began by recalling a time when things were falling apart.

“I was playing singles tennis for San Diego State University, which has one of the stronger tennis programs on the West Coast, and I’d lost ten matches in a row. Not only was my game coming apart, but my emotions were shot, my temper was flaring, and nothing about the game was enjoyable to me. At that point I came down with mononucleosis. For several weeks, I couldn’t go to classes or practice, and the medical staff said they couldn’t do anything for me.

“I wanted to return to the kind of healing I’d been raised with, so I called a Christian Science practitioner to pray for me. I was totally well within two to three days. But I continued to lose tennis matches.”

Poor play is more than a stone in the shoe to a competitive athlete, especially one who is looking ahead to playing pro tennis. Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi’s credo comes to mind: “Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.” But in a more realistic moment Lombardi also said something that sounds more like a quote from St.

Paul: “It’s not whether you get knocked down. It’s whether you get up again.” Eames decided to get up, by going deeper spiritually.

Eames says he reached a point of total discouragement. “I decided to go to the local Christian Science Reading Room one more time, and as I entered, an issue of the *Sentinel* caught my eye. It featured an article on motives. As I read it and thought about my motives for playing tennis, it became clear to me that while I was purporting to serve God, ultimately I was serving Ned and my vision of how things should go with my tennis game. It was a real eye-opener. I decided from then on to play with the single motive of glorifying God. No matter how I played, I’d put God first.

“My playing still stunk,” Eames says, but he won his next ten matches through “sheer blue-collar persistence.”

In the Gospel story of a man’s healing of blindness, after Jesus’ first “treatment” the man said, “I see men; they look like trees, but they are walking about.” Then Christ took the man to a new vantage point, and he saw everything clearly. (See Mark 8:22–26.) And yes, that kind of spiritual clarity can happen on a tennis court. Enough to change how a guy sees life’s purpose.

In sports it’s called being “in the zone.” For Ned Eames it happened at an intercollegiate tournament match against “a much better player.” Not only did he play some extraordinary tennis—with grace, consistency, and pure enjoyment of the game—he also saw himself “in a whole new spiritual light. Everything came together for me.”

That moment became a touchstone that Eames still returns to for inspiration. He caught a glimpse of a sport as a means of weaving physical, intellectual, and emotional development together with growth in moral character. What he would later see is that tennis could also be a means of doing greater good for more people than just “number one.”

Following three years on the Association of Tennis Pros satellite tour, Eames worked in sales and marketing. Later he developed a management consulting practice. In the back of his mind, though, was the idea of combining two loves—for tennis and for a community and its children—into a viable social enterprise.

Although Tenacity has no connection with any religious organization or philosophy, and is wholly funded by contributions from local businesses, major corporations, and individual donations, in one sense it does have a religious purpose. The root meaning of *religion* is “to bind,” as in vows binding someone to a monastic order. Eames hopes Tenacity can act as an influence to bind together a city that has sometimes suffered from division by race, ethnicity, and economic status.

Tenacity program director Andy Crane observes that “there are so many distractions and negative influences in kids’ lives, in the music they listen to and lyrics they memorize. If they weren’t here [in our After-School Excellence Program], they’d be watching cartoons or hanging out doing nothing.”

Crane offers a guarded smile when asked if there's a spiritual dimension to his own motivation for helping kids. He says he's not a religious person. But, "You just feel really great when you see a kid doing well. It's uplifting, as much for us [tutors and tennis instructors] as it is for the kids. When you see the gap between the potential and the reality of their lives, and you can play a role in reducing that gap . . . it's very satisfying."

The story of how the name *Tenacity* came to be tells a lot about its co-founder's sense of mission. Eames and several other "stakeholders" and consultants spent a full day searching for the right name. Hundreds of possibilities were considered. At the end of the day none really soared. A few minutes before they were going to call it quits, Eames said to the group, "This is really about helping city kids learn what it means to succeed through persistence." Someone else said, "My gym teacher used the word *tenacity* all the time."

They had their name.

"If you look at it from an evangelical point of view," Eames says, "what we have is an opportunity to bring together people from different neighborhoods, to take down walls of difference, with the common ground being tennis and academics. We see we're all the same in essence. A lot of these kids live in a youth culture that says, 'It's not cool to try [to succeed],' and we want to create a place of safety, [where they are allowed] to try. That's exciting."

This evangelist message is "Little things make a pattern for greater good. Discipline, perseverance, timeliness, responsibility, sportsmanship, communication skills—these are all essentially qualities that God gives to each child equally," Eames says. Tenacity's aim is to help kids translate the gifts they've been given into basic life-skills. "We're not trying to produce the next Venus Williams." Tenacity's business plan projects that the organization will serve 4,560 of Boston's less affluent kids annually by 2007.

While he was very much a tennis instructor himself in 1999, today Eames focuses on wisely expanding a non-profit enterprise. "The whole non-profit world is going through a transformation. More rigor is being demanded. You have to have clear objectives and credible results in order to receive funding. In a for-profit business, there may be venture capital funding, and at points along the way, the VCs evaluate performance. We need to earn the right to expand our evangelical mission, and the demand is there in the city [of Boston]. As social entrepreneurs, we need to grow to meet that demand."

Social entrepreneurship is Eames's shorthand for "deciding you're going to base your career on serving others," and employing "the talents God has given you." He argues that as a society "we're not always good at helping people get into careers where they can fully express what God is to them. Even those people who are focused on spiritual growth can neglect that inner need to be a blessing to others. I believe you can translate a vision [for public service] into full employment of who you are as a child of God."

When asked what's making him pray these days, Eames replies, "Every aspect [of Tenacity's operations]. A principle of [organizational] growth is that if you're in business to help others, you'd better watch out. The thing can mushroom. The challenge being, How can I manage this [enterprise] without losing the spirit, the qualities we started with?"

The demands of fund-raising have been challenging for this social entrepreneur. "I have incredible comfort with tennis, with life-skill development, but incredible discomfort with situations related to expanding a non-profit." One of those situations is looking a potential donor in the eye and asking for the contribution. "You're going to the wealthiest people, who usually created wealth in the corporate money game," to ask them to invest in something whose value is measured in non-monetary terms. But, says Eames, "Tenacity is about creating something valuable, and value [in lives improved] equals real wealth."

When Ned and I leave the study hall for the courts below, we can hear the thwacks of ground strokes, counter-punching the beat of a disco tape coming from the aerobics room. Kids are hitting backhands with authority, but they're not the only ones getting lessons in self-esteem and value to the community. "I've chosen something outside the business mainstream, and I still have people asking me, 'So, are you doing this full time?' " Yet Eames sees the importance of simply "showing that it's possible to be fulfilled by being God-motivated instead of by financial rewards. Society moves us toward 'money' jobs," rather than toward careers that address needs such as racial harmony and serving others.

Eames's idea of mentoring the next generation goes beyond character development. "I'd like to see Tenacity kids starting [service] organizations of their own some day. And I'd like to see our funders getting involved with new social initiatives, to see them expanding their horizons on how to think about wealth and enterprise."

It's not in Tenacity's motto or mission statement, but one thing this organization fosters is love—love for tennis, of course, but also love translated into respect for others, order, poise, devotion to a mission, and love for a city and its potential for diversity within unity.