

By Norman Zeitchick

Tennis: Making A Difference

Tenacity, a Boston program of tennis and academics, provides a pathway to excellence for kids in need



Betsy Cardoso lives in Dorchester, MA. Her neighborhood was recently devastated by a huge fire, forcing many families to move into temporary shelters. Even before the fire, however, Betsy's neighborhood was consumed by violence and drugs. It was a place where parents were not comfortable letting their children play outside or even cross the street by themselves.

Betsy, a 6th grader at the Gavin Middle School in Dorchester, has learned to be strong and resilient in the face of such a difficult environment. One reason may be that she spends every afternoon after school playing tennis and studying in a city-wide program in Boston called Tenacity. In her first year in the program, Betsy has gone from C's in school to all A's and B's. She's also become a ferocious, die-hard tennis player, learning to play with consistent effort to go along with her unquenchable desire to improve.

Tenacity is a non-profit program that offers free tennis lessons year-round to the youth of Boston. But although the

program uses tennis to reach out to kids, Tenacity is not just an afterschool and summer tennis program. It combines tennis with academic enrichment and a focus on life skills to give at-risk children a head-start in life. "Tenacity tries to provide a pathway to excellence," says founder Ned Eames. "We try to make a difference in kids' lives."

Make a difference it does. Tenacity presently serves over 2,500 children between the ages of 7 and 15 in its summer program, and hopes to involve over 4,000 kids by 2007. During the school year, Tenacity, along with tennis instruction, provides scholastic support and guidance to 102 at-risk students.

"Kids have become motivated to do well in school," says Elliot Stern, principal of Boston's Thomas Edison Middle School. "Tenacity is providing an opportunity to open new doors, create new possibilities. That is very powerful."

Tenacity was the brainchild of Ned Eames, who is now its President and CEO. Captain of the San Diego State University tennis team, Eames played professionally briefly

before getting an MBA from Boston University. But it was while he was a management consultant working in New York City that he saw how instrumental a tennis program could be in helping inner-city kids.

“I saw what New York City did, involving tens of thousands of kids in programs providing tennis and schooling during the year, and being from Boston, I knew that nothing similar was being offered,” says Eames. “There were some 70 to 80 outdoor courts in the greater Boston area that weren’t being used, and there were no citywide offerings in tennis or afterschool support.”

Through volunteering and observing, Eames discovered that approximately 80% of a child’s waking hours is spent outside of school. As more and more of a child’s non-school time is spent in unstructured and unsupervised activities, it becomes a recipe for trouble. In the inner city of Boston, there is a growing population of over 10,000 children who fall into an “atrisk” category--kids who lack access to quality out-of-school programming.

Eames decided to make this his life’s work, and he set out to put together a nonprofit organization to serve kids in the Boston area. He partnered with Bud Schultz, a former ATP Tour professional player who was the Director of Tennis at the Longwood Cricket Club, and together

in 1999 they co-founded Tenacity and started to raise money for their tennis dream.

It was hard going at first, but they had a lot going for them through their contacts in Boston tennis circles. “The backbone of our funding is from individuals – people who love tennis, love



Boston, love kids and value education,” says Eames. As the first seed money began to trickle in, it became easier to approach the private and public sectors for contributions.

It took two years to raise \$1.8 million for the “Birth” phase of the organization, but eventually Tenacity was able to partner with two Boston city agencies, the City Recreation Department and the Boston Centers for Youth

and Families, and launch the two programs that form the backbone of its mission: the Summer Tennis and Reading Program and the After-School Excellence Program (ASEP).

Tenacity starts with a free tennis program in the summer that is open to all kids in the city of Boston ages 7 to 15. It meets

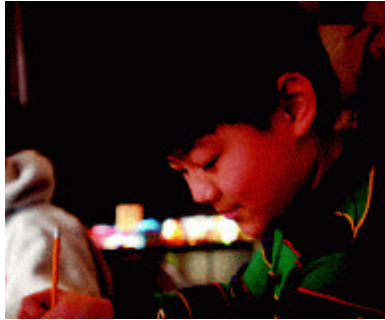
for three hours a day, five days a week for seven weeks at twenty municipal facilities. Most of the staff is volunteer teaching pros. “Every day, each site stops tennis for 30 minutes and everyone – instructors included – reads,” points out Eames. “We’re partnered with a program called ‘Read Boston’ for resources in reading.” This summer, over 2,500 kids participated in Tenacity’s summer tennis.

From the summer program, Tenacity identifies a select number of underserved middle school students who would benefit from academic support and a structured after-school environment during the school year. “We use the summer program to recruit these kids,” says Eames. “We look for kids who are socially and economically disadvantaged, who love the game of tennis and are willing to commit for a full three years to the program.”

At this time the program calls for 15 kids to be selected from each of six participating middle schools. Together with 12 at-large selections, that makes 102 kids enrolled in the After-School



Making a Difference



Excellence Program in 2003. “We are not trying to impress anyone with large numbers,” elaborates Eames. “We are trying to make a difference in somebody’s life.”

Tenacity fosters an active partnership among the students, parents, schools, tennis instructors and academic tutors. The kids sign an agreement to attend regularly all program activities over a three-year period while they’re in middle school. They also have to maintain at least a B average – in effort, not grades--in school. In return, Tenacity provides a structured study hall supervised by an academic professional, supported by volunteer tutors. Besides academics, they participate in exercises focused on life skills and character development. And, of course, they receive tennis instruction.

“It’s about getting rackets in the hands of kids and teaching them lessons about life,” says Patrick McEnroe, Captain of the U.S. Davis Cup team who has given his support to Tenacity. “Tennis is a humbling game. Every player makes a lot of mistakes, but as a player, you always come back and try to get a little bit better. I think that persistence is a valuable lesson for today’s urban youth.”

Instrumental in Tenacity’s success has been the contributions of its strategic partners, points out Eames. Andy Crane, the program director, has been with Tenacity from the start, developing the curriculum being utilized. Thomas Menino, the mayor of Boston, his office and various city departments have been invaluable partners in serving the needs of the kids. Eames also singles out Harvard University, which provides free classrooms, tennis courts, student volunteers for tutoring as well as some funding.

“The Harvard Business School also helped us develop a program to measure the performance of the kids in the program,” says Eames. “It developed a

balanced scorecard that provides a comprehensive measuring tool in three areas – tennis, academics and behavior – using teachers, parents, tennis pros and the kids themselves for evaluation. Once again I stress that although it’s not a large group program, it is designed to change the lives of these kids.”

Despite its initial success, Tenacity is not sitting on its laurels. This year Eames and the board of directors have launched the second phase of their program, called “Rallying to Serve.” The goal now is to raise \$10 million over a five-year plan to serve over 4,500 Boston youth annually by 2008.

“We want to grow in three areas of programming,” says Eames. “One is the Summer Tennis and Reading Program. We want to double the number of kids that participate. The second area is in the After-School Excellence Program. We want to get all 16 middle schools in Boston to participate, increasing the number of children in the program to 240.”

The third area of growth is what Tenacity calls its “Complimentary Initiative.” It wants to hook kids into tennis earlier, while they’re still in grade school, while providing high school tennis to continue the children’s development after middle school. “Out of 22 high schools in Boston today,” says Eames, “only one has a tennis team. There just isn’t the budget or initiative in the inner city.”

That’s where Tenacity steps in. “We are introducing tennis into the elementary schools physical education programs,” says Eames. “Partnering with the USTA’s schools program, we help set up a tennis curriculum they can use in grade school. Then we invite the kids to join us in our summer tennis program.” With the ASEP program, Tenacity will continue its influence through the middle-school years.

To expand at the high school level, Tenacity has created two new citywide high-school tennis teams. “Any student in the city of Boston can join these teams, which we set up in conjunction with the Boston Public Schools Dept,” explains Eames. “Hopefully, as interest and funding continue to grow, we will be able to grow tennis at the high school level.”

How has this “pathway to excellence” performed? Let’s again look at our friend Betsy Cardoso. At the beginning of each session, Tenacity has each child identify realistic goals for herself for the semester. Betsy’s were to get better grades and to get better in tennis “by focusing more.”

Betsy is a very popular girl in school. Before enrolling in Tenacity, her social life was at the point that it was interfering with her schoolwork. Now, however, she has made an explicit choice not to team up with friends who might distract her from what she needs to do. She has become one of the hardest workers in both study hall and on the tennis court. Her grades have improved dramatically and she has been evaluated by the tennis pros as much improved in her tennis this year.

Betsy also influenced her younger brother, Brian, to come to tennis with Tenacity on Saturdays. Brian is a fifth grader, and his tennis has improved over the course of the year. When he was told last week that he was showing “good hustle,” he said, “I know. I learned that from Betsy.” ❁