

# Serve & Volley

## Tennis changed Ned Eames' life ... now he's using it to help others

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When Ned Eames looks back on his years growing up in Worcester, he can't help but have mixed emotions.

"I have some very good memories," Eames said. "It was a tumultuous time. I can remember feeling a little embarrassed and out of place because of the choices my dad had made and the situation my dad had moved us into."

Those were tumultuous times in general, the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Eames' father, Ashley Eames, chose to join the counterculture and help make the world a better place. The senior Eames had been a teacher at Governor's Academy in Byfield, then called Governor Dummer Academy. His own father had served as headmaster at the school for 29 years.

Ashley Eames took a job as a community organizer for Plumley Village, a subsidized housing complex in Worcester. Eames, his wife, son and two daughters had been living on the campus of the posh prep school. The family moved into a small apartment on Laurel Street.

"He didn't feel he could do that job and earn the trust of the tenants unless his family lived at Plumley Village," the younger Eames explained. "It was a whole new arena, a new world - new sights, sounds and smells. It was confusing and jarring."

Eames, who was 11 when the move occurred, would go on to attend alternative schools in the city and then graduate from Doherty Memorial High School. He would make many friends and become something of a legend for his talent on the tennis court.

Two decades later, Eames' Worcester experiences would play an important role in what he chose to do with his life.

Motivated by a strong social conscience, Eames, now 48, has used his love of tennis and the positive associations the game has for him to found and lead a nonprofit educational organization called Tenacity. The organization, with offices

in Brighton, helps children with limited opportunities gain a firm foothold in life through tennis activities and assistance with reading skills. Tenacity operates year-round in 15 Boston neighborhoods. It touches the lives of more than 3,000 students a year, many of them in middle school and at that critical age when they are starting to make their own choices about the direction their lives will take, Eames said.

At its annual gala earlier this month, Tenacity marked its eighth year in operation. Eames, who once competed against the world's top tennis players, has formed a partnership with the Annual Champions Cup Tournament, which features tennis greats, including Jim Courier, Pete Sampras, John McEnroe, Mats Wilander and Todd Martin. During the four-day tournament, the pros and the Tenacity students joined forces on the court, as well as at the gala.

One afternoon, the pros and the kids mixed it up on the courts at the Murr Center at Harvard. Then the kids served as ball boys and ball girls during the competition. The gala doubled as a welcome to Boston for the legendary players and a fundraiser for Tenacity. The dinner event raised \$1.1 million.

"It's a huge thrill," Eames said. "It was an incredible demonstration of many parts of our community coming together around the sport of tennis and youth."

Eames recalled that his early years in Worcester had their share of complexity. His grandfather, Herbert Hardy, had been a Worcester banker, and his grandmother, Katharine Hardy, lived off Salisbury Street. It was difficult explaining his father's choices to the crowd that gathered at his grandmother's house.

After living in Plumley Village for several years, Ashley Eames moved his family to a big old house on Sever Street. Ned attended the Worcester New School and then the Worcester Alternative High School, which was housed in an old grammar school on Elizabeth Street.

In the early 1970s, the tennis boom hit Central Massachusetts, and several clubs opened across the region. Ashley Eames took his son to the Westboro Tennis & Swim Club. The younger Eames immediately felt at home on the court.

"Tennis became the one thing I could hang on to as I went through all the changes in housing and schooling," Eames said. "Tennis gave me an identity I could trust."

Before long, Eames was a frequent presence at the Worcester Tennis Club. David Sobel, the club's manager and pro, recalled Eames as "a real good kid with a wicked good two-handed backhand."

"That was his major shot," Sobel said. "He went pretty far with that shot. He was a hard-nosed worker on the court. He was always ranked in the top 10 in New England junior tennis."

Eames transferred to Doherty for his senior year. He and Michael True, a classmate, soon became good friends. True laughed when he recalled that he used to tease Eames about his buttoned down look.

"Ned was outgoing and real likable," True said. "We very quickly hit it off. He was just a good guy."

Eames had friends from all walks of life, True said, adding that he is not surprised at what his high school pal has ended up doing.

"He brings an awareness that inner-city kids may not be all that different from the country club kids," said True, who teaches math at Forest Grove Middle School.

After graduating from Doherty in 1978, Eames went on to San Diego State University and then joined the professional tennis circuit.

"I spent three years playing in the minor leagues of pro tennis," Eames said. "When I found I wasn't going to win Wimbledon - ever - I made a big decision, in 1985, to come back to Massachusetts and go to work in Boston."

He worked in sales, got a master's degree in business administration from Boston University and became a management consultant. Then he got a bug to get out of the corporate world. He realized that his years in Worcester had nurtured an independent, creative streak.

"At the alternative schools I got to design my own curriculum," he said. "I saw that Boston could use a citywide program. This thought kept coming back that tennis was a way to do that. Tennis had given me so much - friends, overcoming adversity, learning how to compete and lose."

Today, Tenacity sponsors two programs, both designed by Eames. One is held after school and the other in the summer. Tenacity has 23 full-time and 30 part-time employees, along with 200 volunteers. The organization has no religious or other affiliation and raises its funds from individual donors, foundations, corporations, special events and government grants, Eames said. It has a budget of \$2.3 million a year.

Eames said that he is most proud of the fact that, in a city in which the school drop-out rate is 30 percent, 95 percent of former Tenacity students are in high school or college.

Eames is married to a classically trained singer and lives in Boston, but he still visits Worcester from time to time. He would like to start a Tenacity program in the city, and local supporters are working on making that happen, although they have yet to obtain funding.

"We are in discussion with all the right players," said Ellen Ferrante, a venture capitalist who plays tennis at the Paxton Sports Centre. "We don't have a firm start-up date."

As Eames reflected on those early years in Worcester, his thoughts turned to his father, who now lives in New Hampshire.

"I think he realizes he had a big impact on me, and he's very proud of what's happened with Tenacity," Eames said.

Those who wish to contact Ned Eames about Tenacity can reach him at: [nedeames@tenacity.org](mailto:nedeames@tenacity.org).

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ART: PHOTOS

PHOTOG: T&G Staff Photos/PAUL KAPTEYN

CUTLINE: (1) Former Worcester resident Ned Eames, left, and his doubles partner Richard Wilson at Tenacity's Pro Am event at Harvard University's Murr Center in Boston. (2) Professional tennis player Pete Sampras at Tenacity's Pro Am event. (3) Ned Eames cheers at Tenacity's Pro Am event at Harvard's Murr Center in Boston.

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