

Friday, April 18, 2008

## **Executive Profile**

### **Ned Eames**

Serving up success

Boston Business Journal - by **Mary Moore** Special to the Journal

Ask most social entrepreneurs whether tennis and literacy would work as the model for a successful nonprofit organization and the potential might not pop immediately to mind.

Seriously, what are the chances for a program that combines the sport of kings with reading and academic study designed for youth in tough neighborhoods who have, in many cases, demonstrated little interest in school -- or in tennis, for that matter?

The chances are quite good, as it turns out.



That's because of the vision of Ned Eames, a management consultant-turned-social entrepreneur with a background in professional tennis who took enough hard knocks in his early years to know firsthand the powerful combination that exists in tennis and academics, giving students a reason to go to school and to stay until they graduate.

Eames, 48, gave up the corporate life and, nine years ago, started Tenacity, an organization that prides itself, like a for-profit company, on meeting its three- and five-year business plan goals. The organization is considered among tennis professionals as one of the sport's most respected philanthropic endeavors and among city officials as one of the most impressive local youth development programs.

"The name Tenacity is completely appropriate for Ned Eames because no one is more tenacious than he is," said Larry Mayes, the city of Boston's Chief of Human Services. "He also understands what he's doing. To have someone who understands he's accountable to stakeholders and believes a good business model can bring success, that's enormous."

Tenacity runs on two tracks and, in each, youth are exposed to "equal doses of tennis and literacy," as Eames puts it. One track is a summer program that, last year, drew 4,600 young people to courts in 18 Boston neighborhoods. The second track is a more concentrated after-school program serving 210 middle school students this year, next year expanding to 250.

Tenacity's schedule is pretty simple: play tennis for half the time, sit down and read a book or work on academic projects the other half. Tennis is a means to the end -- and the end is to give at-risk youth the chance to succeed in school and life.

As Eames anticipates Tenacity's 10th anniversary next year, the organization is weighing its future: continue to build the organization's success in Boston or hoist the model to a national level?

More immediately, however, Eames is bringing the national scene to Tenacity.

During the upcoming Champions Cup Boston, which runs from April 30 to May 4, Tenacity will host a fundraising gala at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center featuring Jim Courier, John McEnroe, Pete Sampras and others and a Pro Am tournament -- pairing Boston-area executives against former professional players -- at Harvard University. The Champions Cup is one tournament in the 2008 Outback Tennis Series.

Big names and glitzy events are, for many, a mark of success, but Eames is not among them. He does not measure success in terms of fundraising either, although Tenacity has grown year after year; in 2008, Tenacity has a \$3.4 million operating budget, up from \$320,000 in 1999.

If you question Eames about success, he will point to the fact that 95 percent of the middle school students who complete Tenacity's after-school program are succeeding in high school or college, meaning they have not dropped out. That 5 percent dropout rate is "encouraging", he said, compared to Boston public high schools, where Eames estimates dropouts are at 30 percent.

"The program is not meant to become huge but to make a huge difference in a few hundred kids' lives," he said.

The dollars-and-cents sensibility behind Tenacity comes from Eames; so too does the heart of the organization and, when he recounts the story of his childhood, Eames touches his passion.

Eames spent his early childhood on the lush campus of Governor's Academy in Byfield, Mass., where his grandfather was a headmaster for many years and his father a teacher. When Eames was 11, however, his father had a change of heart and decided his calling was as a social activist. He packed up the family, moved them to the Plumley Village housing project in Worcester and began working to improve living conditions for the tenants.

"Next thing I knew, I was the quintessential outsider living in a low-income housing project," said Eames. "I felt disconnected from the mainstream, educationally and socially. The whole road map got blown up. "

Eames began playing tennis in high school, discovering both a niche and a supportive community to ground him. He went on to play Division I collegiate tennis at San Diego State University and then spent two years in the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) professional satellite circuit. He left pro tennis to get his MBA at Boston University, and went

on to work as a management consultant to Fortune 500 companies, the career he eventually left to start Tenacity.

"Tennis pulled me through the toughest years. It pulled me through Plumley Village and out the other side," he said. "Life was confusing for me, and I didn't have the skills I needed to compete with suburban kids. So I have a lot of empathy and passion for the kids I see in our partner schools in Boston."

Renaud Alexandre is among them.

"When Tenacity said we'll teach you how to play tennis and help you with your homework and academics, I thought it was interesting," said Alexandre, 20, who graduated from high school and now works for Tenacity. "This has been more than just interesting. From the beginning I could see this becoming part of my life."

Tenacity has made its mark in Boston -- well beyond expectation, said Joe McNay, chairman of the board at Essex Investment Management Co., who gave Tenacity its first \$100,000. Now the pressing question is whether Tenacity should go national.

"That's an issue that's been on the table over the last year -- not only where do we go from here but how big do we go from here," said Bud Schultz, owner of the Cohasset Tennis Club and co-founder of Tenacity. Schultz is the former director of tennis at the Longwood Cricket Club, where Eames is a member and sought support before launching the nonprofit.

Eames said he struggles with the decision to expand, but does not feel pressured.

"I still honestly know that there is an infinite amount of work to do in Boston, to serve more kids," he said.