

## **The unknown citizen: With Tenacity, students pick up more than just tennis**

**By Sandra Serkess, M. Ed.**  
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As founder and administrator of Tenacity, a program tens of thousands of Boston's youths have enjoyed and profited from, Ned Eames is truly a citizen worth knowing. He has attained his dream of "transforming youth and building community through "literacy, life skills and tennis."

Just ask his dad, Ashley Eames, or my son, John Michael.

He grew up in a housing project in Worcester, and tennis classes were offered to him. He found that for him, it was more a game. His early success and positive reinforcement gave him a strong sense of identity, more self-confidence and most importantly, a direction. So much so that he gave up his other sports to concentrate on tennis.

From ages 13 to 17, he partook in the New England Open Tournaments and did extremely well, ranking fourth in singles and second in doubles.

At one of the clubs his father took him to, the pro took a real interest mentoring him. Eames eventually won a partial tennis scholarship to college, where he majored in his business, earning an MBA.

He worked in the business world for several years, but one day knew that he had to return to tennis, his first love, using his MBA. This was in 1997 when he was in his mid-30s.

He wanted to continue the gift that he was given — tennis lessons. And so he researched some existing programs, notably the New York Junior Tennis League. He studied it and wrote a proposal, taking it to two very influential tennis men in Boston: Joe McNay and David Fish, tennis coach at Harvard University. They were enthusiastic and introduced him to others who could provide financial backing.

Then, when he had the backing and the plan, he presented the idea to Mayor Thomas Menino.

This began the partnership between the city and the backers of what would soon become Tenacity, a 501C3 nonprofit. The city provides the courts, nets, maintenance, ice for water and other supports, including the "red shirts" who account for a significant portion of Tenacity's summer staff. They are given one week of training, learning how to teach and coach.

My son keeps going because “the counselors are so nice,” and all of the children I talked to there echoed the same sentiments: this is what brings them back each year.

Ned started out with three full-time employees, and now has 40. He started out with 10 sites and now has 30. He started out with about 500 kids, and now has about 5,000 per summer. Each site has a site director, tennis coaches and the “red shirts.”

The program is not all tennis. It really is inclusive, beginning with some running as a warmup, lots of tennis playing and a literacy component.

The participants read for 30 minutes daily. Daniel Gonzales is the site director in West Roxbury. He has been at a few of the sites and praises them all. He marvels at the teamwork and the role modeling he sees happening, as well as kids just plain having fun!

But wait! That is not all: they also partner with six Boston middle schools to provide afternoon coaching and literacy.

The student enrolls in grade 6, and must promise to attend for three years, three days a week, three hours a day. There, the literacy component is much more rigorous, as they have certified literacy coaches who use an excellent curriculum based on Boston’s curriculum frameworks. They play and read for equal amounts of time.

Tenacity was honored at 2008 US Open and will be featured on CBS sometime from noon to 1:30 p.m. on Sunday, Aug. 24, during the Arthur Ashe Kids’ Day television broadcast featuring a short video about Tenacity.

Tenacity was awarded the FAO Schwartz Fellowship Grant and was approved as an AmeriCorps program host.

John Fox is one of the counselors, his first year following several as a student. Every day he brings his brother, Will, who also loves tennis. Tommy Daley plays because he loves it and wants to be like his dad, who played tennis.

This is Julia Canty’s fourth year and she is “having great fun!”

Ciaran Cawley loves the competitive aspect, while Margaret Leonard hopes that after six years as a pupil, she will graduate to volunteer next year and counselor the year after that, when she is 15.

Tennis anyone?

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