

# **BRONX FAMILY**

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## **Better Opportunities with City Program Students excel with the guidance of CitySquash**

By Tiziana Rinaldi

Kingsley Amoako and Andrew Cadienhead won't be looking back this September, when they kiss their old public school goodbye and enter freshman year at two posh academic institutions in Connecticut.

The two teenagers, who will be attending the Canterbury School and the Taft School, respectively, turned dreams into reality thanks to CitySquash, the nonprofit organization that helps underprivileged and at-risk children in the Belmont, Morris Heights, East Tremont and Fordham neighborhoods maximize their academic, athletic and personal potential.

“CitySquash has opened many doors for me. Looking at myself now from a few years ago, when I joined, it's unbelievable,” said Cadienhead, who started in sixth grade and is amazed at the way things have worked out.

“I have worked very hard to make it where I am now,” said an equally enthusiastic Amoako about the outcome of his dedication.

Headquartered at 602 East 187<sup>th</sup> Street, CitySquash works closely with Fordham University, the Rose Hill Campus, where the program has ample access to squash courts and, occasionally, classrooms.

“We open up opportunities,” said Tim Wyant, CitySquash executive director and four-time All-American player on the squash team at Harvard College. “We give our students the tools necessary to get a good education and be physically active, so they're healthy and feel good about themselves.”

The goals are to boost children's school performance and hone their sporting skills, in order to place them in the best high schools and colleges offering squash scholarships.

“There's no better way to [promote] culture and professional success than to expose kids to a community that values them as much as the squash community does,” said Wyant.

Launched in 2002, CitySquash is partnered with P.S. 205 and M.S. 45 in the immigrant area of Belmont where it served 115 students last year and over 750 to date. Out of the 47 in its initial cohort, the organization has placed 29 in private schools, securing a total of \$3.5 million in scholarships. Five students who remained with the program since its inception are attending college.

Recruitment into the intensive, year-round, educational and athletic curriculum is done through highly selective tryouts that, due to the large demand for after school programs and CitySquash's local fame,

can last up to three and a half months. Only children who demonstrate promise in both program areas, and are therefore best suited to leverage the nonprofit long-term offerings, are accepted.

Students as young as eight-years-old can participate. “The first entry point is the spring of third grade,” explained Wyant. “If students do well, we invite them to our six-week long summer camp. At the end we make determinations about which [ones] we'd like to work with in our fourth grade program.”

Time commitment increases with grade and reaches its most rigorous stage during the middle school years, when attendance to the program averages four to five days per week plus weekend matches and tournaments at Dartmouth, Harvard, The Naval Academy, Northeastern, Princeton and Yale.

Team members must study one, to one-and-a-half hours before playing and keep an academic average of at least 75 percent. The middle school team average this year was in the mid-eighties.

A well rounded curriculum of tutoring, athletic training, mentoring, and cultural activities ranging from a reading club, museum visits, movie screenings, sporting events and, this year, even the presidential inauguration makes sure that kids are provided with the support and community feeling they need to guarantee their ultimate success.

“When I need anything I ask [CitySquash],” said Miguel Betances, a 12-year-old at MS 45 who used to score in the 70s when he joined in sixth grade, and whose marks are now in the high 80s. “They help us with homework, prepare us for tournaments, do drills with us.”

Betances won second place at a recent Urban Individuals Nationals tournament and hopes to be accepted at either Avon Old Farms or Trinity-Pawling high schools.

Once students are in high school, CitySquash's expertise turns to college guidance, tours, SAT preparation, and help with applications.

“CitySquash helped me have better opportunities, and with that a new view in life,” said 18-year-old Tanesha Jackson, a longtime member of the organization who will attend Wesleyan University on a squash scholarship this fall.

Not unexpectedly, CitySquash's children were unaware of squash before. “They don't have the social and cultural associations with the game than an upper class kid might have,” noted Wyant. “They don't know that most squash is played at private schools and country clubs. But, the more they play it the more they see that it's a sport [practiced] in affluent communities. They like that, it strengthens their [self-esteem].”

Freshmen Amoako and Cadienhead, who now rank number 67 and 20 in the country for their age group, couldn't agree more. They both see good things in their future, they said. Amoako sees himself, “going through [challenges], but overcoming them,” while Cadienhead's ambition after college is “to go on to create a business or an organization.”