

**The Greenwich Time**

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# **CitySquash Unites Greenwich Families and Bronx Student-Athletes**

By Michael Dinan

Katrina Intal and Diana Edwards, both eighth-graders at Middle School 45 in the Bronx, stretched out on the wood floor of a squash court in a restored barn behind the Betteridge family's Belle Haven home. The 13-year-olds grabbed their rackets, warmed up, and spent the next hour "coming around" to smack "Philadelphias," "lobs," "roll corners," "drives," "nicks" -- even the dreaded "boasts" -- along the "rail," off the "tin," toward the "oak tree" and against the "backwall."

By now, both girls are familiar with the sport's jargon, though when asked what she knew about squash before picking up a racket for the first time two years ago, Katrina replied, "I thought it was a vegetable." It is. It's also a sport, invented 175 years ago at an exclusive north London boys' school attended by Lord Byron, the poet, and historically enjoyed by the upper class.

But the court game became the central activity and motivating force of Intal's life -- and the lives of 39 other poor Bronx kids -- when they entered an intense enrichment program as sixth-graders. CitySquash, established four years ago by Westchester entrepreneur Sanford Schwartz, has drawn a tightknit group of squash-playing Greenwich families into the athletic, academic and social lives of Bronx schoolchildren selected for the program.

"What really blows me away about our connection to Greenwich is that it literally hits every single level of the program," said Tim Wyant, executive director of CitySquash, a nonprofit organization. "Dozens of Greenwich families, schools and clubs host practices, advise us on the private school application process, volunteer in the program on summers and weekends, sit on our board. The Greenwich community isn't just sending us checks. Take Greenwich out of the picture and I don't know if we even exist."

Every fall, Wyant and other CitySquash officials walk from their organization's offices to Middle School 45 in the Fordham section of the Bronx to hold tryouts for the program. In 2002, 32 sixth-graders tried out for CitySquash's 10 spots. The next year, 79 kids tried out. Then 103 in 2004, and 111 this year. Wyant estimates that approximately 90 percent of the kids involved in the program are from families living below the poverty line.

CitySquash doesn't perform detailed financial background checks, Wyant said, because what matters most is a kid's athleticism and drive.

"We want students that are athletically gifted, who enjoy squash and who, in addition, have academic aptitude and a strong work ethic," Wyant said. "We want kids with good character and great personalities." They get them, said Lianne Swaine, 43, a Cobb Island resident who two years ago started hosting and chaperoning City-Squash kids for weekend tournaments in Connecticut that her 11-year-old son, Matthew, was competing in.

"These kids are so wonderful. We absolutely love them, to the point where we've become an extended family," Swaine said on a recent weekend while a half-dozen CitySquash players romped around in her recreation room downstairs, affectionately dubbed "The CitySquash House" by the players. "We track their progress at school, follow what they're up to after school, besides squash," Swaine added. "These children are working hard and they really do want to make a difference in their own lives."

The 10 kids from CitySquash's inaugural sixth-grade class have now moved on to the ninth grade, and three of them received financial aid packages to prominent New England boarding schools, Wyant said. Improved academics is a major goal of CitySquash. Grade point averages among kids in the program's inaugural class rose an average of six points, Wyant said. To stay in the program, CitySquash players must demonstrate that they're committed to both their schoolwork and the team. Through the program, the kids also are involved in community service programs and field trips.

Academic excellence is a goal shared by the middle-schoolers involved in the program. Freddy Hernandez, 14, an eighth-grader who won the 15-and-under division at a recent squash tournament in Stamford, said he hopes to attend Groton School in Massachusetts next fall. "I'm hoping to improve my squash skills, academic skills and just become a better person," Freddy said while his CitySquash teammates stood by at the Swaines' house. "I love it here," added Freddy, who said his grades have already improved from the mid-70s to the 90s since he got involved in CitySquash. "Through the squash I've met a lot of people in Greenwich and have a lot of fun with them. We go to tournaments, hang out, go to the movies, swim in the summer, play other sports. I love it."

Christopher Fernandez, 12, a seventh-grader, said he'd probably be a different person if it wasn't for the program. "I changed a lot, I think," Fernandez said. "Like I just used to be with friends, doing stupid stuff, and the squash got me off the streets."

"I didn't do anything bad," Fernandez quickly added. "Just stupid. I'm not a bad person."

Jennifer Arboleda, 13, an eighth-grader, said she intends to apply to The Hill School in Pottstown, Pa. She's been studying for the SSAT, a test required by private high schools, and has already seen her grade point average jump seven points over the last year. "CitySquash, the people there, Tim and everyone, they help me stay on track and like

they just give me the push I need to keep on going and stay focused on schoolwork," Jennifer said.

Back at the Betteridge home, 18-year-old Amanda Better-idge, a Greenwich Academy senior and nationally ranked squash player, stepped off the court with the two Bronx girls she's coached, mentored and played with at home and at CitySquash's summer camp at Fordham University. "They're definitely improving all the time," said Amanda, who sends text messages and e-mails to Katrina and Diana during holidays when they don't see each other. "They can hit balls at the back of the court, nail down their returns and have a lot of new skills that they didn't have before."

Amanda's mom, Diana Betteridge, sat on a sofa beyond the court's Fiberglas backwall, beneath a marker board listing court sprint-times and names of a dozen CitySquash kids that have come through her home, including Willy, Alija, Tanesha, Jose, Amy and Steven. Those kids have become a part of her own family's fabric, Diana Betteridge said, and she's seen the program's intense focus on squash develop disciplinary and academic skills among the players.

"It's a program that I believe in," Diana Betteridge said. "It's really about striving for excellence in everything. It's more than a strictly social program." Katrina and Amanda returned to the court while Diana Edwards, who intends to apply to St. George's School in Newport, R.I., talked about what she's learned from her new favorite sport. "I think squash teaches you that you can always do better, you can always improve your game," Diana said. "You can't ever be perfect at squash."