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# Squash and the city

*Bronx kids Benefit from Schwartz's Vision*

By Todd Sliss

Flights in and out of the United States were grounded and Sanford Schwartz had an 18-hour drive ahead of him from Indianapolis to his home in Scarsdale. It was Sept. 11, 2001, and the world had changed dramatically in the blink of an eye.

On the long drive Schwartz had plenty of time to reflect. That's when he planted the seeds for a program that a year later would come to fruition as CitySquash, which has greatly affected the lives of at risk, underprivileged South Bronx youths. Since Schwartz couldn't change the past, he decided to alter the future.

“It was a long night's drive, a rare thing,” said Schwartz. The 58-year-old president of Research Horizons, a marketing research firm. “My mind was sort of contemplating what I wanted to do with my life. I've supported other programs, but I felt it was time to roll my sleeves up and not just write a check.”

There is no question that squash is an elitist sport and may continue to be that way because of specialty equipment and courts the sport requires. There were urban squash programs in Boston, Philadelphia and Harlem for Schwartz to draw from, but he didn't copy them—he surpassed them.

CitySquash is more than just a squash program. Academics, cultural events, book groups, community service, and character-building are all stressed and everything adds up to create a more complete student.

“It's really an academic program,” Schwartz said. “I use squash as the hook, but it's much more. Squash also provides us with access to very charitable people.”

There are 100 students in the program from third grade through high school –29 were admitted to private high schools and 32 have won national urban squash titles. When CitySquash started it focused on middle school kids who then went into high school. Now the players start as early as third grade, and with few exceptions, if kids don't get their foot in the door by that time, it's hard to get in. The first class of five started when they were in sixth grade in 2002 and just graduated from high school. All five are going to college, three on full scholarships and two to city schools.

“The general philosophy we've developed over the years is that we'll do better if we start younger,” said executive director Tim Wyant, who was hired by Schwartz at the program's inception. “It's better athletically and academically. They also get a better self-esteem earlier if they begin younger.”

Wyant was a four-time All American and a two-time captain at Harvard, where he volunteered for SquashBusters, the first urban squash program in the country. After touring professionally for two years, he joined CitySquash and has served on the boards of U.S. Squash and the National Urban Squash and Education Association, of which CitySquash is a founding club.

After Wyant's services were secured, all they needed was a home base, courts, and a pool of kids to draw from. That was the tough part.

CitySquash's headquarters the last three years has been 602 East 187<sup>th</sup> Street in the Bronx, not far from Fordham University and the Bronx Zoo. The modest office is five blocks from P.S. 205 and M.S. 45 – nothing fancy, but enough to get the job done, providing office and meeting space for the staff and a place for the kids to have tutoring and book clubs. There are eight full-time staff members: three are exclusively academic, there is an office manager and four squash backgrounds, two being exclusive coaches.

“We need to be thankful for Tim and how committed he's been,” said Josh Schwartz, who is Sanford's son and a member of the junior board. “He went to Harvard and had pro squash and had other opportunities. He's so committed to it. Now he lives in the Bronx, a symbol of that. The whole staff is great and they work hard to benefit the kids.”

### **Getting started**

Schwartz approached several communities – communities that may now regret not taking advantage of his offer – before accidentally landing where he did in the Bronx. In New Rochelle there were no courts, a community near Sarah Lawrence turned him down, and in White Plains local courts were uncooperative. Then he was on his way to Lehman College, took the wrong exit and found himself outside the gate to Fordham College seven years ago this month. It was serendipity, as Fordham is the home base for squash, though many others have donated facilities for CitySquash.

At partner schools P.S. 205 and M.S. 45, the demand to get into the program is high: Over 750 kids have tried out. Rigorous tryouts take place in the third, fourth, and sixth grades, and last over three months. According to [www.citysquash.org](http://www.citysquash.org), “Selections are based on attitude, work ethic, athletic ability, enjoyment of squash, teacher references, academic standings and commitment level.” For every new spot available in the program, approximately 10 student try out.

Of the 90-100 kids who apply as third-graders, about 20 are chosen and that number goes down to around 12 or 13 as the years go on. When they get into sixth grade the program begins to heat up as far as squash and academics are concerned.

“It's hard to be in the program, a big commitment,” Wyant said, “If a kid wants to stick with it and work hard, they will stay in it. The problems usually come with attendance and academics.”

Of the nearly 1,000 students at P.S. 205 in the South Bronx, 94 percent are at the poverty level and receive free lunch. Principal Maria Pietrosanti (the wife of Scarsdale village engineer Nunzio Pietrosanti) described the school as “a port of entry for many poor and immigrant families from poverty stricken areas of the Dominican Republic, Mexico, South America, the Middle East, Asia and southern

Europe.” The school has no gym and recreation is minimal.

“We jumped at the chance to have some of our students participate in this extracurricular activity,” Pietrosanti said. “It was great that the children would learn about a sport that was relatively unfamiliar to them and get some much needed exercise. It wasn't until we actually were involved in the partnership that we realized how powerful this relationship would become in the future.”

Things aren't much better at M.S. 45, where there are two sports teams, one gym class per week and over 60 percent of students meet state standards in English and math.

CitySquash has helped change some of that. Students share their experiences with classmates, especially upon returning from tournaments.

“It gives them a glimpse of what exists outside of their immediate inner city community,” Pietrosanti said. “As a result, they broadened their horizons and set higher goals for, hopefully breaking the cycle of poverty.”

Pietrosanti was pleased to see the program expand down to the third grade and hopes it reaches even further to the youngest students in the school. After all, the sooner they learn about things like sportsmanship and team building and have another support group when it comes to academics, the better off they will be. Many of the CitySquashers have returned to P.S. 205 to give back to the next generation.

“It warms my heart when I see our former students escorting out current students in the community for practice, tutoring or meeting them to go to a tournament,” Pietrosanti said. “It gives me hope for the future.”

A large number of the program's ninth-graders actually leave CitySquash in favor of prep or boarding school, for which the staff helps secure scholarships for them. So far 29 kids have earned \$3.1 million in prep and boarding school scholarships.

“There is no more important goal for us than seeing the kids graduate from college,” Wyant said. “Part of that comes from developing them as athletes on a local, regional, and national level.”

Andrew Cadienhead heard about the program as a fourth-grader and joined after CitySquash recruited in his sixth-grade class.

“At first it was a little frustrating because I couldn't hit the ball all that well,” Cadienhead said. “Then I learned how to do it and I thought it was fun. In seventh grade I started to get good.”

In addition, it also proved good exercise as the once chubby boy was now becoming a slender young man. Now an eighth-grader, Cadienhead is preparing to head off to the Taft School in Connecticut on a scholarship thanks to his sport and academic support.

“My grades improved,” Cadienhead said. “Every marking period when I was in CitySquash my grades have gone up. I try to do well so I can keep playing squash.”

Graduating from the program brings with it a major change in his life – leaving home.

“The ideal sounded cool because I thought it would be fun to get away from my mom, but as it gets closer I've gotten more scared,” Cadienhead said. “I'll be alone and I won't know anybody.”

Squash and academics will not end after high school as it does for many of his classmates in the Bronx. “I want to go to an Ivy League college and I want to become a businessman,” Cadienhead said. “That's as a result of the program. I never thought of that before this.”

### **Plenty of local help**

Many current and former Scarsdale residents have offered support financially and physically. Michael Luskin, a partner at Hughes, Hubbard, & Reed LLP, is a founding member of the board of directors. His family has been involved, as have members of the Schwartz family.

“It feels great to have local support,” Schwartz said. I'm amazed every day how charitable people in general have been to us. At least a dozen Scarsdale families, adults and kids have volunteered.”

Josh Schwartz, a 2001 Scarsdale grad, was always in some way hands on with the program, running practices and working at different events with the kids. After he graduated from Yale in 2005, where he played for four years and was a second team All-American, Josh began to take on a larger role. He is a member of the junior board, a mentor, runs practices every other Sunday at the Yale Club and ran a fundraiser that appealed to the younger squash following.

“I thought it was great my dad would give his time and money,” Josh said. “He followed models of the other programs, so he set this apart and raised the bar on urban programs. Tim focused on the competition and they've been pretty dominant. Then when they get to prep school or college it dramatically changes their lives. This changes the trajectory of their lives and you see how thankful the kids and parents are.”

When they were at Scarsdale High School, Josh introduced squash to Lauren Coape-Arnold (Scarsdale '02). Though soccer was Coape-Arnold's sport in high school, squash was her sport in college – she played four years at Amherst, and was a captain as a senior. It wasn't until she was out of college and worked her first job at Lehman Brothers that she was reintroduced to someone from Brown who she had played squash against. It was recommended that Coape-Arnold check out CitySquash.

“When I realized it was Sandy's it was that much more interesting,” Coape-Arnold said. “That was the spring of 2007. It became a regular commitment and the last two years have been full steam ahead. It's my all-time favorite endeavor.”

Coape-Arnold proved her loyalty to the foundation, which eventually led her to getting a mentee of her own, “who had a different set of tools growing up educationally and athletically” and also an invitation to the junior board.

Working with a CitySquasher has been both challenging and rewarding. “Unlike many other programs that focus on high school, we focus on the three pivotal years of middle school, which is where the bulk

of our students are.” Coape-arnold said. “It's a tough age and the past year I've had to work hard to earn her trust, but I can see her maturity. I'm excited to see her play and I look forward to getting ready to apply to boarding school.”

In addition to the staff, the board of, the advisory board, the junior board, the participating squash clubs and the volunteer mentors, it also takes an \$800,000 annual budget to provide for the CitySquashers. The program has relied on generous donors and sponsors and holds fundraisers each year, though none bigger than the “Bash,” held June 4 in Manhattan. Even in these economic times, the Bash was sold out as over 700 attended the program's biggest fundraising event, which took in over \$350,000.

“Some of the top players in the world were there,” Sanford Schwartz said. “No other sport do you have anything like this.”

Five years ago CitySquash held its first Bash and raised under \$15,000. Clearly a lot has changed for the organization and most importantly the future.