

# THE RESPONSIBILITY PROJECT

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## Squash Dreams

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On a recent Tuesday, Freddy Hernandez, a sophomore at Franklin & Marshall College, stood on a squash court walloping a rubber ball rapidly against the walls. It made a sound like a yearling at full gallop. Tim Wyant, a 33-year-old former member of the U.S. national squash team, watched Hernandez hit while filling me in on the basics of the game. Squash is played on a smaller court than the one used in racquetball and the ball is slower, with less bounce, demanding more speed and endurance from the players. It originated at England's Harrow School in the 1860s and later migrated across the Atlantic to counterparts in the Northeast, eventually making its way to the Ivy League. The first stateside squash court was built at St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, a boarding school that counts Senator John Kerry among its alumni. Played mainly at a handful of top colleges and universities as well as country clubs and upscale urban gyms, the sport retains associations of privilege: "squash for the rich, racquetball for the middle-class, handball for the poor," is a refrain still heard around the courts.

After Hernandez packed in his racket, Wyant and I walked outside, onto Fordham Road in the Bronx, a thoroughfare lined with cellular shops, check cashing storefronts, and signs hand-lettered in Spanish. Wyant ran a hand through auburn hair and grinned. "Not the game's natural habitat, is it?"

That squash has come to signify something besides the vegetable in this primarily Latino and African-American neighborhood is largely Wyant's doing. For the past nine years, he has quietly recruited third- and sixth-graders from two nearby public schools and has turned a surprising number of them into top junior players. The organization he runs, CitySquash, requires the kids to take part in after-school academics and community service while offering mentorship and help with school placement. Nearly all the participants come from low-income families; many were born abroad or are the children of immigrants from places like Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Kosovo. Few had heard of the game prior to joining. "When I first made my pitch in front of a classroom and asked if anyone had heard of squash, not a single hand went up," Wyant recalled. His recruits have subsequently won national competitions, beating fields of predominantly white junior players from New England boarding schools, and about half the kids who stick with the program go on to attend those same schools. Some continue to top colleges and universities like Cornell; Hernandez is one of the elite players that return to coach the kids on Fordham University's courts. Wyant and a staff of eight run the operation, which serves 125 students, from a second-floor office around the corner from the

pizzerias and Italian markets on Arthur Avenue, a section of the Bronx where on some nights you can hear gunshots.

Born to a venture capitalist and a Procter & Gamble executive in an affluent enclave of Cincinnati, Wyant attended a prep school and later Harvard, where he majored in religion and became captain of the squash team. Competing since age 7, he loved the sport but had grown increasingly troubled by its insularity. "I'd played in maybe 30 junior tournaments," Wyant remembered, "and out of hundreds of players, I saw one African-American kid." While at Harvard, he encountered an idea he thought could bring squash out of the country clubs: a former pro named Greg Zaff had started SquashBusters, an after-school program that introduced the sport to low-income students from Cambridge and Roxbury while pairing it with academics. Thanks to Zaff, the game founded at an English boarding school was being taken up by a new and entirely unlikely group of students. After two years competing on the European pro tour and a stint working for Ralph Nader, Wyant was offered an opportunity to run a program modeled on Zaff's in the Bronx; soon after, he moved into a one-bedroom walk-up a few blocks from Fordham Road. He was 24 and looked far younger; when he showed up to take a group of sixth graders to a competition, some parents nearly refused to turn their children over to him.

The affluence of the squash establishment has proven a boon to Wyant's program: CitySquash was founded by a Scarsdale businessman, and one of its institutional sponsors is Goldman Sachs. It has also offered the kids and their parents a glimpse of social realities not often seen on Arthur Avenue. Barbecues held at the homes of board members and other supporters have taken place in plain view of Tudor mansions and stretches of private beach; for kids headed to out-of-state boarding schools, the transition means learning to socialize with wealthier peers from the suburbs. The disparity underscores a dilemma: in attempting to improve the lives of local children, CitySquash often takes them out of the neighborhood. "It's something we wrestle with," Wyant admitted. "We're not out to create individuals who end up moving to Short Hills. We're only trying to offer our kids the best educational opportunities. We want them to have options."

"When I first heard about squash, I thought 'there's no way I would ever do this,'" said Andrew Cadienhead, a 16-year-old whom I met at the CitySquash office. Cadienhead's family moved to the Bronx from Kingston, Jamaica, when he was 5; this fall he'll be a sophomore at the Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut, and co-captain of its squash team, which is ranked second in the country. "It was strange at first," he said about the transition, "but I've learned to keep an open mind, and learned that there aren't boundaries to the kinds of things I can do." The tougher part, he said, is returning home. Myriam Kelly, 19, agreed. "When I lived in the Bronx there weren't many places to go after school and not get into trouble, and my parents didn't want me and my sister out there, so every night we stayed indoors and did homework," she said. Kelly came to New York from a remote region of Honduras called Gracias a Dios when she was nine; after graduating from the Westover School in Middlebury, Connecticut, she will attend Bates College in Maine. "Sometimes when I see friends who stayed in the city, it can be difficult to reconnect," she added. "Our lives have become so different."

Kelly and Cadienhead met and became friends at CitySquash. They agreed that, for them, the game has served as a social glue that has superseded ethnic and economic differences. "When I was younger, I was very shy because of the language barrier," said Kelly. "Squash has made it easier to become friends with kids from different backgrounds because it's given us something in common." Kelly said she plans to become an analyst for the FBI and learn Urdu. Cadienhead has become interested in business; in his first semester at Taft, he was elected class president. "Sometimes, at tournaments, other players look at me as this kid from the Bronx, someone they can beat easily," he said. "The greatest feeling is proving them wrong – showing them you're not what they think."

*Alex Halberstadt is the author of Lonely Avenue: The Unlikely Life and Times of Doc Pomus. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, GQ, Salon, New York Magazine, and other*

*publications.*