Racquet Up courts urban kids

Sporting program exercises bodies and promotes literacy

On a recent Thursday afternoon at the Northwest Activities Center in Detroit, a group of 10 kids played fierce sets of squash while a second group of 10 rehearsed their haiku poems and best Langston Hughes imitations for the following evening's Open Mic night. An hour and a half later, the groups switched activities.

On the surface, this is what Racquet Up, an urban squash education program, looks like. But what really happens here is the stuff of miracles. Not miracles in today's overused lexicon but miracles in terms of lives tangibly being changed. With a challenging physical and mental sport as its centerpiece, Racquet Up Detroit is about giving young at-risk lives a viable chance at a college degree. In a city with a high school drop out rate hovering around 50 percent, that's the equivalent of divine intervention.

Two years ago, Derek Aguirre, a St. Louis native, moved to Detroit four days after graduating from Harvard with an MBA. He'd also worked for six years for SquashBusters, the first urban squash education program for youths in the country. Having connected with Detroit as a University of Michigan undergrad doing community service here, Aguirre had long wanted to return and start his own nonprofit using the game of squash as a vehicle and with a specific emphasis on significant impact and sustainability.

Sustainability is a trendy concept these days, but Racquet Up is designed to be just that — to endure, to stick, to last.

Kids are in Racquet Up not just for an academic year or a summer session. They commit to eight years in the program: from the fifth-grade until they graduate from high school. Aguirre says anything less would be just a temporary fix. "If you're going to aspire to have a long-term impact on the lives of kids who are in situations where the odds are stacked against them, you have to have this kind of continuity, duration and intensity," he says. "Not every kid makes it but when they do, it catapults them to a new height in terms of educational attainment, personal development and fulfillment."

If Racquet Up follows the same track record of its predecessors (Detroit is the ninth of about a dozen urban squash education programs), 100 percent of students who reach high school will graduate and more than 90 percent will attend college, many at select private schools and playing intercollegiate squash.

When Aguirre began canvassing schools, the demand was huge. Seven schools were vying for two open slots. Seventy kids showed up for tryouts. Only 40 could get in. Aguirre met with each finalist's family in their home (sometimes he got fed dinner, sometimes not) to ensure they understood the long-time commitment and to sign the partnership agreement detailing core principles of Racquet Up: "I.C.A.R.E." which stands for Integrity, Concern for others, Appreciation, Respect and Effort.

By January 2011 the first class of 40 fifth-graders from two elementary schools, Schulze Academy and MacDowell Elementary, began attending three after-school sessions a week that comprise squash and fitness training, one-on-one tutoring and literacy training. There's also a strong community service component so the kids develop the value of service.

This summer, Racquet Up will travel to Williams College in Massachusetts to compete with "300 other kids from some of the toughest schools in the country," Aguirre said.

Even now, in their second year, the kids are skillful squash players and grades are on the upswing. Aguirre says the whole community has been "overwhelmingly supportive. That's what moving to me. From the school principals and teachers to the Activities Center where we work, to the volunteers and the families, to our donors who have taken a risk with us — all of the stake holders have come to the table because it is blatantly obvious that we all have to rally around kids in the city."

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