



# CHARITABLE INITIATIVES

## Champions One and All!

### *Children with special needs enjoy tennis program at Prospect Park*

Every autumn, the Prospect Park Tennis Center's tennis bubbles fill with cheers of encouragement as the Special Aces Tennis Program gets underway. This unique program offers Brooklyn kids with special needs a rare opportunity to improve their motor skills in an engaging group setting. For 21 weeks each year during the indoor season, qualified physical and occupational therapists join Prospect Park's tennis professionals and volunteers to provide exercise and tennis instruction to children with varying degrees of physical and cognitive challenges. Special Aces is a program of the Prospect Park Alliance, the non-profit organization that partners with the City of New York to maintain and operate Prospect Park.

The program was founded by Prospect Park Tennis Center Director Paul Campbell in 2007 as a way to offer not just exercise, but a boost of self-esteem to kids who often face some tough physical challenges. Now in its fifth year, the program has grown to 50 participants.

"I knew from the beginning planning stages of the Tennis Center that I wanted to establish a program for kids with disabilities," Campbell said. "My wife is a therapist, and she volunteered in a special tennis program many years ago in New England. I felt that it was important to start a program for special needs kids in Brooklyn, but it wasn't until the program actually started that I realized just how important it really was. Special Aces has been great for the kids and for their parents. There just aren't many sports programs for this population."

Players from six- to 18-years-old are grouped according to age and ability into two sessions on Sunday afternoons. Tennis pros, therapists, and volunteers provide close su-



*Volunteer Philip Akpan, Krishna Santos, Jaeden Granger, Abraham Imani and Coach Adrian Clarke*

*Volunteers Adam Borak and Anna Greene, along with Coach Winston Ramsay with George Panagiotakos and Eric Skinner of the Special Aces program*



pervision and attention to every child. At the beginning of the season, children are assessed to determine factors such as flexibility, strength and general coordination. Kids then learn the basic fundamentals of tennis in fun and innovative ways specially-tailored to their needs and abilities. Therapists participating in the program report improvement in the children's hand/eye coordination, physical strength and attention span over the course of a seven-session program.

The Tennis Center is even able to offer a number of sport wheelchairs for use by children in the Special Aces Program. These chairs are extremely adjustable and help many children participate more fully in program activities. Having two hard courts facilitates the use of wheelchairs, and the special sports wheelchairs are a thrill for the kids to use because of the increased maneuverability.

Parents of children who have participated in the Special Aces Program report that even

those with severe cognitive problems are better able to interact socially with their peers and adults during the tennis sessions. The Special Aces Program also helps ameliorate the isolated families of special needs children by giving them a place to join other parents to watch their child play a sport.

Thanks to the generous donations from Bulova Stetson Fund, Translation Aces, the USTA, and The Joseph LeRoy and Ann C. Warner Fund, tuition for the program is able to remain low and scholarships are available.

"Special Aces is a great and extremely well run program," said Michael D. Stalonas, executive director of The Warner Fund. "The professional staff and the volunteers are warm and caring. The children truly love the opportunity to learn the fundamentals of tennis, as evidenced by the great percentage of kids that come back each year. The Warner Fund feels very privileged and proud to be able to fund such a wonderful program."