

Kings County Tennis League

During the COVID-19 shutdown, the Kings County Tennis League served up online tennis programming for their students.

By Scott Sode

The Kings County Tennis League (KCTL), an organization whose mission is to bring tennis to kids living in and around Brooklyn public housing, was preparing for the final two classes of its winter program when the COVID-19 virus swiftly seized the city. One by one, indoor facilities KCTL utilized to teach during the colder months shut their doors. Then the mayor ordered all students in New York City Public Schools to stay home. In the ensuing months, Brooklyn would become one of the hardest areas hit by the virus in the state.

"We had to shut down abruptly, which was very sad," says Mara Mazza, communications director for KCTL. "But our immediate concern was the wellbeing of our families and our students, and trying to figure out if there was any way we could support them."



Photo: A KCTL student prepares for a tennis lesson in the hallway of her building.

Staff, board members and volunteers quickly swung into action, taking the extraordinary step of individually calling all 269 families that had registered for a KCTL program in the last 18 months. The content of these conversations: How are you feeling? How is distance learning going? How can we help you?

"It's really important for us to remember that we are a community organization," says Rob Gerstman, a program manager for KCTL. "And as we [had these conversations] and conversed with resident presidents of the six housing developments that we serve, it

quickly became apparent that our families could use our assistance."

As a result of these discussions, and thanks to some generous donations, KCTL launched the KCTL Cares initiative in early April. KCTL Executive Director Dave Webley coordinated with the resident presidents to personally deliver groceries and other supplies to families in all six of the developments.

"We were really excited to kickstart KCTL Cares," Gerstman says. "We wanted to let our families know that we were there for them, that we could help them out and [bring them] the important items they needed."

The initiative was ongoing throughout the pandemic and the staff continued surveying individuals to further assess their needs; they also distributed multiple books (courtesy of neighborhood non-profit Brooklyn Book Bodega) to every child in their programs.

Once KCTL Cares launched, the organization then began brainstorming how they could keep their tennis-loving pupils active and engaged from home.

"Our winter session ends in March, and then we usually have about a month before we begin what we call our Upswing program, which is for our most advanced students," Gerstman explains. "It didn't take long for our executive director to guide us and say, 'Well, we're not going outside for that, so let's plan this virtually. What would that look like? How are we going to do this?'"

Gerstman and his co-program manager Adam Joyce immediately set about sorting through all the logistics. They researched what digital platform would work best and developed two separate lesson plans: one for the Upswing cohort and one for their larger Saturday morning programming. (KCTL's Saturday morning sessions, a hallmark of their mission, is a much larger program and doesn't generally begin until the summer, but the team decided to push up the start date to help serve more kids.) Each lesson, they decided, would be built around a theme (i.e.: "We're all in this together") and contain both tennis/fitness and off-court educational elements. KCTL staffers sent registrants a Target gift card so their families could purchase balloons to temporarily serve as a DIY stand-in for racquets. (Joyce was actually inspired to use balloons by an activity he saw on the USTA's Net Generation website.)

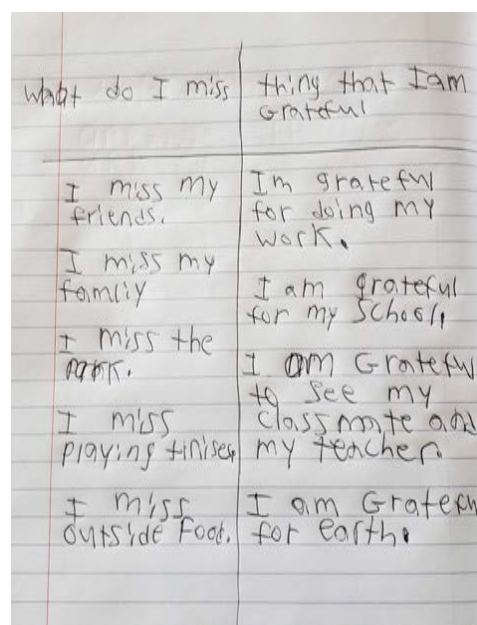


Photo: Activity: A KCTL student completes an "off-court" assignment.

"And then we practiced, practiced, practiced [teaching the sessions]," Gerstman says. "Between my OCD and Adam's intelligence, we really made sure that everything was ready to go. But we also understood that we needed to be flexible. And [we kept in mind] our goals [for the classes]. That we will teach tennis, fitness and off-court learning, but most importantly that we will bring our KCTL community together to build relationships and have fun. That's the key to everything that we're doing."

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The early returns suggested they succeeded—and then some. Attendance in each Saturday class consistently grew, and enrollment in the Upswing program went up 50% over last spring, when the sessions were obviously held outdoors.

"We were giving these kids an opportunity to share, [and it was an opportunity for us] to reinforce that no matter how they are feeling, it's all valid," Gerstman says of what he thinks made the new format so successful. "At the same time, we were allowing them to escape, play tennis, get fit, do jumping jacks, do shadow strokes, play with a balloon.

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It's really important that kids can just be kids in a time like this. That helps them to get through things."

Seeing that their programming was clearly filling a need, KCTL staffers again worked with resident presidents to bring even more kids from the developments into the fold. As a result, the virtual Saturday program ended up including students who had never set foot on a court before and learned about the sport through their computer for the first time.

"The classes are not all about tennis," Mazza explains. "Obviously we want them to exercise and practice the skills that they've built over the years, but it's actually more about getting the kids to interact with one another and talk with us and get out their feelings. Kids are craving interaction. I think even we were surprised by how much the kids are really excited to talk to us and talk about what their days are like. That's been the true gift."

Gerstman agrees.

"The truth is that I had my doubts about virtual programming, but the classes more than exceeded my expectations," he says. "Our KCTL community remained vibrant and together. These sessions were never going to be the same as our time with students on the court, but the teaching moment for these kids is that when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade. And so that's what I hope we can impart along the way. You have to adjust, you have to be flexible, you have to be spontaneous and smart about what you do, and you have to make decisions in the best interest of your communities.



Photo: Gerstman conducts a Saturday morning session over Zoom.

And then, at the same time, you can continue to have fun and build relationships. That's really what we're focusing on."

Photos courtesy Kings County Tennis League

USTA Eastern Wins Player Development Section of the Year

During a very dark time for the sport, USTA Eastern received some bright news: In May, the section was officially named the 2019 Team USA Player Development Section of the Year as part of the annual Team USA Coaching Awards. And USTA Eastern was in good company. Other recipients included Corey Gauff (father to rising star Coco), who was named Developmental Coach of the Year, and Jay Berger, the head men's coach for Team USA at the 2012 and 2016 Olympics, who was named Legendary Coach.

In 2019, USTA Eastern's Competitive Department (led by Julie Bliss Beal) continued their work in developing one of the strongest junior pipelines in the nation. USTA Eastern's Eliot Spizzirri captured the boys' doubles title (with partner Tyler Zink) at the US Open, while fellow section junior Alexa Noel made the Wimbledon girls' singles final. Cannon Kingsley, another Eastern player, reached the quarterfinals in boys' singles (and the finals in boys' doubles) at the Australian Open, and then went on to make the semifinals in boys' singles at the US Open later in the year. In addition to Kingsley, Noel and Spizzirri, 11 other USTA Eastern athletes participated in the 2019 US Open: Kristie Ahn, Robin Anderson, Ronald Hohmann, Elvina Kalieva, Jamie Loeb, Tara Malik, Christina McHale, Noah Rubin, Hibah Shaikh, Madison Sieg and Valencia Xu. Beyond Grand Slams, fifteen Eastern juniors scored top results at national championships in 2019, with eleven capturing gold ball tournaments, including Stephanie Yakoff, who won the Junior Orange Bowl and also reached the Easter Bowl semifinals and Clay Court Finals in the girls 14 & under division.

"The Eastern Section always has a steady stream of players performing throughout the whole pathway, from top juniors nationally to the international level, and this showed in 2019," said Johnny Parkes, who at the time of the announcement served as USTA's Senior Manager, Player ID and Development. "The section exudes professionalism, dedication and commitment as they provide supplemental training and competitive opportunities for players, coaches and parents."



Photo: Beal (center) with competitive department staffers Ali Goldman and Gustavo Loza.