

Center of Attention

The New York Junior Tennis & Learning's new facility isn't just a state-of-the-art venue for players, it's also a valuable resource for the community

by Jon Levey



It shouldn't stick out. That was the directive given to Gluck+, the architects commissioned with designing the \$26.5 million Cary Leeds Center—the new centerpiece of New York Junior Tennis & Learning. Set amidst Crotona Park, a sprawling 130-acre public space in the South Bronx, the hope was not to bring an overwhelming presence to the urban community. So the two-story, 12,000-foot clubhouse had a level built underground to minimize its footprint, and its two sunken stadium courts were carefully constructed. But the truth is, given the impressiveness of the new facility and the good works of the organization, it's impossible for the NYJTL to remain under the radar.

The NYJTL has been mentoring youth in both tennis and life since 1971. An offshoot of the National Junior Tennis League, founded by Arthur Ashe and Charlie Pasarell in 1969, the New York chapter was started two years later by Ashe and founder and chairman emeritus Lewis "Skip" Hartman.

While the program has succeeded in producing its share of talented players, Ashe envisioned an impact much

broader than cultivating champions. He wanted the organization to serve as a tool to teach children from kindergarten through 12th grade broader life skills, such as teamwork and responsibility. Tennis achievement, academic enrichment and character development serve as the organization's pillars.

Over NYJTL's 45-year existence, the numbers speak for themselves: 10,000 children mentored annually by 4,000

staff members; 75,000 kids reached through tennis training from P.E. instructors in all five boroughs; 500,000 hours of free tennis in 100 percent of NYC council districts; 3 million hours of year-round tennis programs, academics, healthy living and personal growth for children and their families. There are also initiatives, such as FACES and Volley against Violence, that address pressing issues in the South Bronx.

Park Place Built in New York City's Crotona Park, the Cary Leeds Center includes 20 renovated courts and two new sunken, stadium courts.

One of the greatest compliments to the NYJTL is that many of its site directors were once students in the program.

With the Cary Leeds Center, the organization has a state-of-the-art hub from which to increase its impact. In 2013, with a nearly 50/50 split in public and private funding, ground broke on

RANDY RUBIN/GLUCK+



Dual Effect Students will learn on the tennis courts and in the classrooms of the new facility, which was completed in April.

the facility, as well as on reconstructing Crotona Park's 20 existing courts. The site opened two years later, with the stadium courts completed this April.

The center's namesake, Cary Leeds, played tennis at Yale, then briefly on the pro tour before turning to coaching. He died in 2003 at age 45, and his family donated \$3 million to the project in Leeds' honor. Other major benefactors include Pershing Square Capital Management and the Kiam family, which lend their names to the stadium courts.

The Cary Leeds Center is a hybrid facility—it houses the newly surfaced courts, pro shop and expansive locker rooms found in a typical high-end tennis club, as well as the classrooms, meeting spaces and garden areas associated with a community center. The facility hosts more than 30 USTA tournaments, the Mayor's Cup—the

largest scholastic tennis event in the county—and it would like to secure a WTA 125K tournament.

Straddling the roles of being both a commercial and non-profit organization presents an interesting challenge.

"We continue to provide 6,000 hours of free tennis courts and training annually to children and accordingly fulfill our fundamental tennis and education mission," says Martin Goldberg, NYJTL's Chairman since 2010. "We also want to use the center for training up-and-coming, high performance juniors in a conventional way. While issues may arise, we don't view the two objectives as conflicting, and in many ways they should be complementary."

To navigate the course, the NYJTL has invested in seasoned coaches and leaders. Rick Ferman, the former Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of the USTA, has spent his lifetime coaching and developing tennis



One of the best compliments to the NYJTL is that many of its site directors were once students in the program.

programs for competitive juniors. He now serves as the Executive Director of Tennis at the Cary Leeds Center.

"NYJTL gives me the opportunity to help children learn tennis, and learn how it can make a difference in their lives as it has in mine," says Ferman.

This past spring, another coaching addition was made: Liezel Huber. The five-time Grand Slam champion and former world No. 1 in doubles is the Director of Tennis and Development.

"I became a player to have a platform to stand on to make a difference," says Huber. "Now I have been given this opportunity to pay it forward."

Ashe described the NYJTL's core philosophy best at its founding: "Our idea is to use tennis as a way to gain and hold the attention of young people so that we can teach them about matters more important than tennis."

The NYJTL may have a new home, but its values remain stronger than ever.