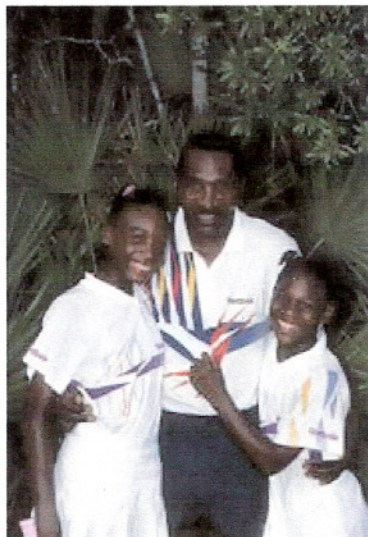
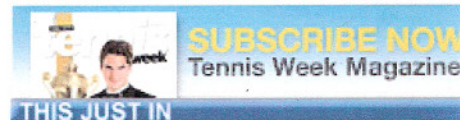


Siblings School: Williams Sisters And Brothers Build Bridge To Better Life

By Kent Oswald

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Serena Williams stands with her sister Venus Williams and father Richard Williams at a tennis camp in Florida

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From the Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles come unlikely laughs, grunts, groans and thwack ... thwack ... thwack as rubber and felt are blasted and spun by graphite-framed nylon. Thanks to two Williams families, pre-teens and teens mix prepping for college coursework with stroking ball after ball at the Venus and Serena Williams Tennis/Tutorial Academy.

Academy Executive Director Richard Williams, not to be confused with father Richard of Venus and Serena Williams, began his tennis career by traipsing through their native Watts after older brother Walter the 20 blocks to the courts at Will Rogers Park.

"One of the things [Walter] would always say about tennis," remembers the 69-year-old, Richard, "[was that it] will get you into another type of environment." And Williams credits the sport with helping him rise beyond a juvenile arrest record and putting him on a better track. He received a tennis scholarship to Pepperdine — playing No. 2 singles — and also was a member of the all-Army team before coming back to give back.

In the shadows cast by the Watts riots, six August 1965 days of looting, murder and arson, Richard and his two-year younger brother Fred — who played in the Army and in Europe — knew tennis could help kids see beyond the neighborhood. They began teaching two nephews on summer weekends in 1969 and quickly grew those sessions to 30 that first year and to over 200 the following summer. They gave lessons and coordinated volunteers and donations from manufacturers and better funded tennis clubs for what was then the South Central Youth Tennis Association (now the California Tennis Association for Underprivileged Youth). They were under no illusions about creating the next Arthur Ashe. There is not the money in the neighborhood to support a kid on tour, no matter how talented the prodigy. From the beginning through today, the

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prize to eye was to keep kids out of trouble and help them obtain college scholarships.

In 1975 the program began to hold court at its current location, the Arthur Ashe Tennis Center. The Center, a part of the 28-acre Rancho Cienega Sports Complex, is located on Rodeo Street, which could only be confused on Mapquest with the much more famous Rodeo Drive — five miles as the crow flies but worlds away in terms of economics and glamour. Still, the dream of having been a part of the Street and being able to turn heads on the Drive can come true.

An athletic gentleman with recognizable "natural ability" joined a beginner tennis class the Williams were teaching for adults at LA's Southwest College. That man, that Richard Williams, is perhaps the biggest dreamer ever to hit a tennis ball. He envisioned having two daughters and turning them into the world's No. 1 and 2.

Father Richard was not just one of the best students in the class, but a great one outside it.

Coach Richard remembers that, "After [Venus and Serena] were born he was talking to us to get assurance, because people were saying that he was crazy..." With hours of hard work beginning when Venus was 5 and Serena 4, what was crazy became the reality of the two Williams sisters. According to Coach Richard, during the four to five hour hitting sessions, "Venus was just like her father. She wanted perfection Serena is a workaholic, [but] not as much as Venus."

Within a few years the girls moved to Rick Macci's Florida academy to pursue their father's vision. However, the family maintained its connection with the Williams brothers' program. Their father continued to drop in on the program when he was in the area and time permitted and their mom hit often enough to master the "spinny minny," a heavily sliced backhand.

In 1995, the first full year Venus was on the tour (Serena turned pro in Sept. '95), the two sisters conducted a clinic. In formalizing what has become an ongoing relationship, the program's name was to be changed first to honor the older sister, until Serena asked, "What about my academy?"

The name changed but the focus remained the same. Connect with the community and work with as many kids as possible willing to put in hard work in their studies and on the court. While a few such as Otis Smith and Leslie Koffi have taken the Academy's instruction as far as the challenger circuits, the Academy's success is more often measured by academic achievement. Academy participants have earned scholarships to Grambling, Howard, Morehouse, The University of Arizona, Tuskegee UNLV, UC Santa Barbara and UC Irvine, among others.

That dream is encouraging parents to get involved, including volunteer coach Fred Brown, who heads up what Richard Williams refers to as "the million dollar family." That nickname is a rough estimate of the financial savings if his children earn free college rides. While his oldest daughter never took up the game, his oldest son graduated from Howard in part thanks to tennis and the second oldest daughter attends Prairie View A&M thanks to tennis. And every other kid knows what's coming. "They would see my oldest son going out every day," says Brown. "We didn't discuss it, but everyone knew. You come from school, [dad] picks you up, you go to tennis."

While Brown talks of the father's pep talks to the kids or of how the sisters will occasionally "sneak in" so they don't cause a fuss, Richard, Oracene, Venus and Serena are modest to the point of secretive about the support they give this and other charities. They are a rare physical presence at the Academy, representatives did confirm that they regularly provide balls, racquets, financial

support and have participated in past fundraising. Additionally, they are a conduit and drawing card for the Academy's sponsors, who over the years have included Anheuser Busch, Coke, Nestle, Wilson and Verizon and other large and small companies.

For anywhere from 20 to 40 kids at a time, the Academy is a mix of paid professionals and volunteers providing academic tutoring and college prep work off, in addition to focused and intense tennis training. Additional programs run under the Academy's auspices are a weekday summer camp, an outreach program offering free lessons to other inner-city youth, a mentoring program, a high school outreach program and a cultural awareness program.

Coy Jones Hunter is currently ranked the So. Calif. Girls' 14s' No. 12. She joined at the recommendation of other tennis players and pros and has been a member of the program for a couple years. She enjoys working with all the coaches and credits her work at the Academy with increasing her confidence and mentally preparing her for tournaments. "The best part of the program is being part of a tennis family," although she also adds that, "the grind of the drills and the endless corrections can be difficult."

Achieving any dream is difficult, but both the Williams brothers and sisters show none are impossible. Connected by the hard courts of LA, tennis was the bridge to a life much better than they were born into. Giving back to where they come from, the gentlemen preach the college path to new generations of players while the ladies offer moral and financial support, as well as serving to inspire the next generation.

Kent Oswald is a long-time Tennis Week contributing writer and former TW editor. His feature story "Tennis No Longer A Scarlet Letter At Rutgers" earned second-place honors in the eighth Annual U.S. Tennis Writers' Association Writing Awards last March.

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